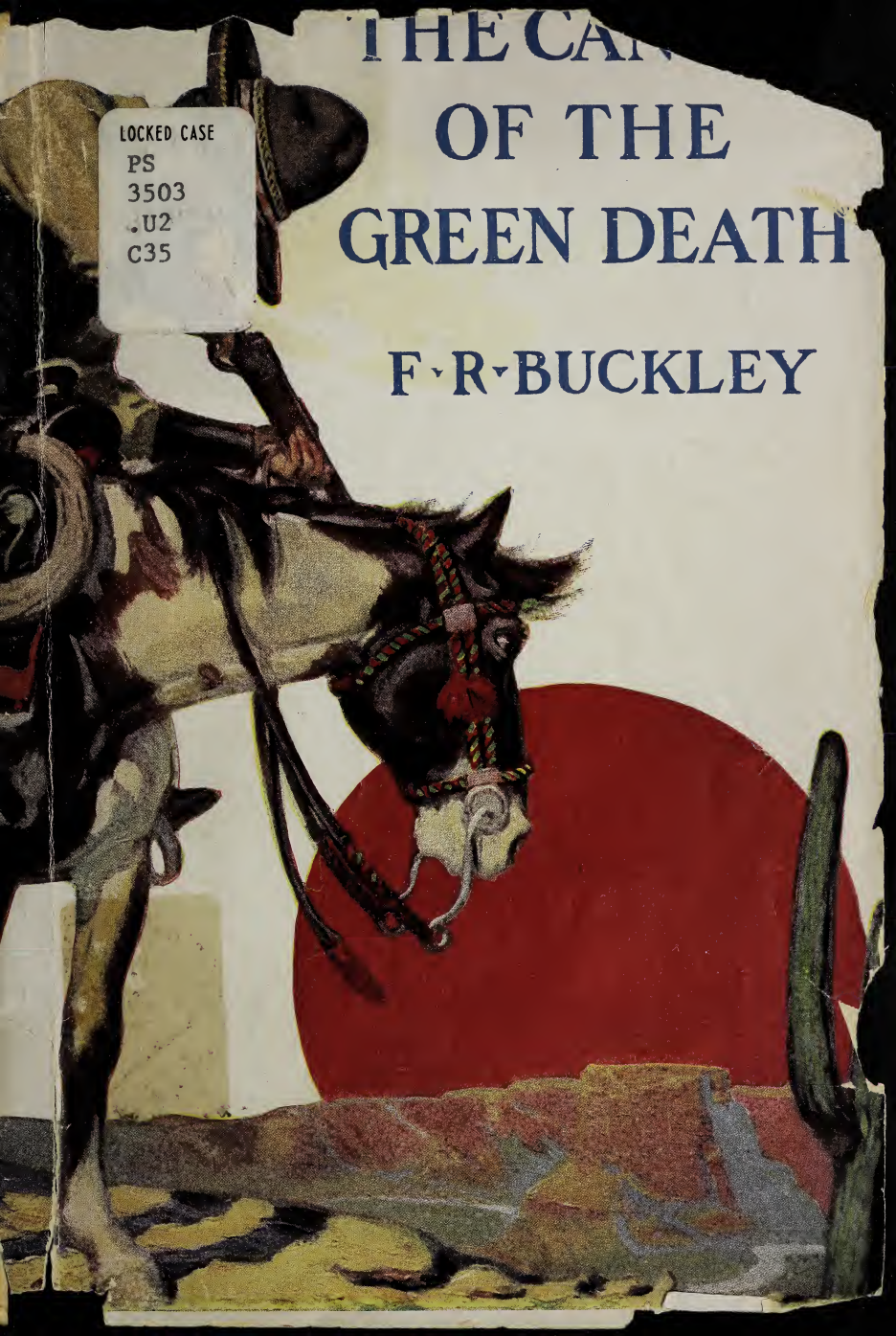
THE CA[illegible]
OF THE GREEN DEATH

F·R·BUCKLEY



LOCKED CASE
PS
3503
.U2
C35

THE LIBRARY
BRIGHAM YOUNG U IV...TY
PROVO, UTAH

INTERNATIONAL BOOKFINDERS
You name it - we find it
P.O. Box 8008, Beverly Hills, Calif. 90212

THE CANYON OF THE GREEN DEATH

THE CANYON OF THE GREEN DEATH

Rare
PS
3503
.U2
C3S
1923

BY

F. R. BUCKLEY

GARDEN CITY NEW YORK
GARDEN CITY PUBLISHING CO., INC.
1923

COPYRIGHT, 1921, BY
DOUBLEDAY, PAGE & COMPANY
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED, INCLUDING THAT OF TRANSLATION
INTO FOREIGN LANGUAGES, INCLUDING THE SCANDINAVIAN

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES
AT
THE COUNTRY LIFE PRESS, GARDEN CITY, N. Y.

THE CANYON OF THE GREEN DEATH

THE CANYON OF THE GREEN DEATH

I

AND now," said the stranger who had ridden up on the tired horse, speaking as if he were not violating every social law of southern California, "I'd like you to tell me just what happened to your arm."

For a moment, the young sheriff of Pueblo Indio stared at his visitor in speechless surprise. So far, the formalities pertaining to calls on the border of the Colorado Desert had been studiously observed. When this tall, loose-jointed wayfarer had padded into town out of the gloom gathering under a spectacular desert sunset, the sheriff, at whose door the lean pony stopped, had first said "Howdy!" in a cordial but noncommittal tone; then he offered the sweating olla of lukewarm water, and finally suggested food. The new arrival had shown himself acquainted with the ritual of courtesy. After drinking, and saying "Good water!", as every desert man must, especially if the liquid offered has resembled a solution of epsom salts, he had declined the immediate invitation to food, and had mentioned the idea of off-blanketing somewhere

at hand. Invited as a matter of course to share the sheriff's cabin, he had accepted without superfluous thanks, had seen to his horse before settling down, and had refrained from embarrassing his host with offers of help in the preparation of the evening meal. He had, further, sat down to the oilcloth-covered table in trousers and undershirt, which proved him acquainted with local usage; and had remarked that it was a warm night, thereby stamping himself a full-blooded desert rat. Anyone not accustomed to the frightful temperatures of the alkali flats would have thought the torridity of the night too obvious to need a testimonial. And now, after all these evidences of good upbringing and in the midst of the peaceful after-supper cigarette, he had suddenly committed the unpardonable sin—of questioning his host about a purely personal matter.

The sheriff raised himself on one elbow from the floor of hard-packed earth.

"I beg your pardon?" he asked slowly.

The big man lying against the other doorpost removed his wheat-straw cigarette and stared at its tip.

"I guess it's me that ought to be beggin' pardon," he said in an engagingly apologetic drawl, "and in a manner of speakin' I do so herewith. However, I notice that there's a bandage around your left forearm, an' I just got to ask——"

Reflectively, the sheriff knocked the ashes off his cigarette. The accent in which he re-

IPB

plied was sufficiently astonishing in itself; for sheriffs on the desert beat rarely have had time to acquire the Yale manner of speech. The stranger noticed it chiefly, however, for the sting it seemed to add to the sheriff's question.

"Suppose I said I'd happened to scratch myself with a pin?"

"Then," said the loose-jointed visitor in a still more apologetic voice, "I'd have to say it was some pin, to have made you wear the arm in a sling for a month."

The sheriff started, looked up, then suddenly sat erect. The stranger, unmoving, continued to examine the tip of his cigarette.

"How do you know that?" snapped the young man.

"Well," came the soft reply, "it's just a matter of having happened to notice, I guess. There's a kind of a band across the back of your neck that ain't as sun-scorched as the rest. Of course, a muffler could have made a similar kind of mark, but who'd wear a muffler when it's a hundred odd in the shade? Your arm bein' bandaged, I naturally figured out a sling. Having done which, I kind of deduced you must ha' been wounded. You bein' sheriff, I wondered whether it wasn't a bullet wound."

He spat an imaginary shred of tobacco off the end of his tongue and coughed deferentially.

"Well?" asked the young man, a dangerous coldness in his voice.

"I daresay you'll begin by thinkin' it's no business of mine," the stranger added regretfully, "but havin' got as far as the bullet-wound, I find myself wonderin' who made it. And then, who could have induced him for to go and do such a thing."

"In fact," said the sheriff, "you find yourself wanting to know all about it, don't you?"

The desert rat shifted position uneasily and drew a deep breath.

"Though I," went on the sheriff, "haven't used my official position even to ask your name——"

"It's Lonnergan—J. C. Lonnergan," said the visitor with an engaging eagerness, "but generally known as Lanky Lon. There was a professor I guided once called me the Stormy Petrel of the Mohave Desert, allegin' that wherever I was there was trouble also, but nobody seemed to have time to call——"

"Or where you come from," broke in the incisive voice.

"Well, nowhere in particular," came the answer. "Letters sent care Geogehan's store in Felipe are liable to reach me sometime, but mostly my address is Pansy's Back, U. S. A. —Pansy bein' the name of my po——"

"Or what," said the sheriff, "you do for your living."

Lanky Lon raised his cigarette to his lips again, puffed rapidly till the tobacco glowed, lighting up the stark contour of his long, lean face, then inhaled deeply.

"Well, that," he said, letting the smoke out

slowly through mouth and nostrils, "is kind of more difficult to answer. You might almost say, more dangerous. There's people alive within ten miles or so of this here cabin who might be right annoyed with me about my profession just now. My regular business is prospectin', you know, but there's times when the Government—er—figures it needs a guy that's kind of used to the desert and suchlike. So just at this moment, I'm an officer of the United States Secret Service."

It was too dark inside the hut, now, for the men to see one another and though Lon turned his sun-wrinkled eyes toward his companion, he could not make out in the faint radiance of starlight, reflected through the doorway by the white sand of the road outside, what effect his words had had. The sheriff did not speak.

"Tryin' to find out," the stranger added, with a sudden grim note in his easy voice, "just who's importin' Chinamen into this country, as provided against the law—an', particularly, into thishyer desert."

The silence on the other side of the doorway was broken.

"Chinamen?" gasped the sheriff.

Lon took another puff at his cigarette, threw it out of the door, drew up one knee, and folded his arms around it.

"Yeah—Chinamen," he said pleasantly. "Who's bringin' them here, an' what for, an' why. Hence my rude questions. Hence a whole lot of things, includin' my comin' to this

town in the first place. Havin' followed certain li'l clues heretofore, I had an idea the sheriff of this town might be able to help me. Findin' you with that bullet-wound in the arm, I was about sure you could. It *is* a bullet-wound, ain't it? However——"

"It seems to me," said the cultured voice from the darkness, "that it would be better to catch them where they enter the country——"

"Probably," said Lanky Lon, "an' I daresay that when next the importers approach their secluded cove, or arrive at the Mexican border, as the case may be, they'll be liable to hear of somethin' not all to their advantage. However, there bein' about two hundred Chinks already here, there's quite a job to be done at this end."

"Two hundred?" asked the sheriff.

"About that," said the quiet man. "Carried into the desert a few at a time—between here and San Jacopo. They ain't seen any Chinks in years at San Jacopo. Travelin' south, I find most of the other towns have seen one or two pass through recently—two at Encarnacion, two at Pottstown, one at Jackson, an' so on—an' when I get down to here, you ain't seen any."

"No," said the sheriff.

"However," said Lanky Lon, "you ain't told me either your name——"

"Paul Roberts," said the young man, rising to his feet and fumbling among the litter on a shelf for the matches.

"Nor yet," continued the easy drawl as a

light flared up, "how you come by that little injury."

"It has nothing to do with Chinamen," came the reply.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," urged Lon. The young man, halted in the act of raising the lamp-chimney, turned, and his lips tightened.

"Nor," said the man on the floor, "I wouldn't light that lamp. You may have had more to do with thishyer business than you think. There may be people outside with firearms, an' bad dispositions. I'd blow that match out."

The match had burned to its last quarter-inch. The young sheriff dropped it hastily.

"You're giving whoever's outside a fine earful yourself, talking there by the door," he snapped, shaking his burned fingers.

"Possibly," whispered Lanky Lon. "Suppose you come back then, an' help in the good work?"

There was something in the dropped voice that made Paul Roberts obey the first command. In regard to the second, though, he hesitated until the personality of his companion, expressed through a trivial question, forced him into speech. Then, with the thought of still more profane ears outside, he told his story in a low voice.

"There's a girl in it, ain't there?" Lanky Lon had asked. Then, in the whisper he had used before, "I'm sorry, boy, but you needn't mind tellin' me. I—I been there. I guess I know. I'm sorry."

"Yes," said the sheriff, "there's a girl in it. There's—a girl."

For a few seconds there was absolute silence in the cabin. From down the sand street came a burst of hoarse laughter from some of the town's other score or so of inhabitants, as the cards went for or against some one of them.

"Name?"

"I don't know it," said Roberts slowly, "nor where she lives. I know nothing about her, except—I only saw her once."

"Well, go on," said Lanky Lon kindly.

"There isn't much to tell," said the young man, after a moment's pause. "I'm sheriff around here, you know. Funny how it came about. I'd got this far on a journey to a mine my dad owned, when I got the news that he'd died and that his affairs were hopelessly involved. That was three years ago. I didn't know where the mine was, or what it was, or anything about it. Dad was keen on secret enterprises, and he was sending me out under sealed orders—going to telegraph me here—where to go next. I never got the message; I'd nowhere to go but back East, and there was nothing to attract me there now I was poor. So I stayed here, and this town elected me sheriff. It was a tough district, and they thought that if a tenderfoot was sheriff, it would continue that way. It was a mixture of gambler, lawyer, and the general blackguard named Thorndike, who fixed the election."

"However," said Lanky Lon, rolling an-

other brown cigarette, "they were disappointed?"

"Yes," said Paul Roberts grimly, "they were. The town's almost a fit place to live in, right now, though I'm not boasting about it. You see, I thought it was decent three months ago; and then one afternoon I'd been out prospecting and rode back to town to find a lout named Dawes standing at a girl's stirrup in the middle of this main street. She was the first woman I'd seen in the place since I'd been here—and the last. Dawes was a half-Mexican, quarter-Indian swine with fat jowls, and he was trying to pull her off the horse."

"You speak of him," said Lon gently, "in the past tense."

"He pulled a gun on me when I rode up and spoke to him," said the college-bred sheriff from the East, "and I shot him. Dead."

"Oh," said Lanky Lan. He seemed slightly startled. There was a moment's silence, and then, with a certain new respect in his tone, he asked, "And the girl?"

"I dismounted to see if there was anything to be done for Dawes," said Paul Roberts. "I only glanced up at her. Our—eyes met, and she said, 'Thank you'. Then a crowd gathered round—Dawes had friends—and there was a bit of a scrap. When it ended, she was gone."

"Is that when you got the shot in the arm?" asked Lon.

"No. Her horse left tracks," said Roberts slowly, "and I followed them. About five

miles, *double* tracks. And then I came to a place where they disappeared."

"Double tracks? Disappeared?" asked Lon. "What do you mean?"

"They had been deliberately wiped out," said Roberts. "The town was in a turmoil, and I couldn't follow the trail till the next morning. During the night somebody had tied a bunch of sagebrush to a horse's tail, and it galloped over the sand in a circle a quarter of a mile wide, wiping out the trail."

"It'd take more than one to do that," said Lanky Lon, a new quality in his voice. "That'd be work for a dozen men."

"Perhaps," said Roberts. "Well, I cast around the edges of the circle, to find where the trail came out again. One edge ran close under an outcropping of rock. When I got within a hundred yards of it, somebody lying behind a boulder fired at me three times with a rifle. That's how I got this."

Lon was silent, puffing steadily at his cigarette for perhaps thirty seconds. Then "Which direction did her trail—their trails—lead?" he asked.

"North," said Paul Roberts.

The puffing at the cigarette stopped.

"North?" demanded the big man incredulously.

"Yes, north," answered Roberts; "into the desert."

It was perhaps ten seconds after this that the sheriff, gazing, in expectation of some comment on this surprising news, at the glow-

ing cigarette-end which he regarded as marking his companion. heard from just outside the door a strangled oath, the sound of a heavy blow, a scuffle of feet, and the thud of a falling body. Rushing outside the adobe hut, he saw. writhing as they fought for each other's throats amid billows of flying sand, two men locked together in the silence of a desperate struggle. His eyes, used to darkness, caught a glimpse of one face as for a moment it was turned upward, its eyes starting as strong hands closed on the throat beneath. It was Lanky Lon. Suddenly, silently as a cat, he had arisen, stuck his cigarette by its wet butt to the wall, so that no exclamation from his companion could betray his purpose, flashed through the door, and fallen on the man who was crouched listening outside. In the instant following Roberts' recognition of him, the loose-jointed desert-rat slipped from the clutches of his opponent, hurled the man who had gripped his throat three feet away with a thrust of his knee, and had risen to renew the death grapple. But quick as he was, the eavesdropper was quicker. A mere shadow in the starlight, a horse was standing ten yards away down the street. The soft sand had deadened the noise of its approaching hoofs; now, close at hand, it saved its flying master. With one wild leap, he was in the saddle. His heels drummed on the animal's ribs, and an instant later, before Roberts could rush into the cabin for the revolver which hung in his belt behind the door; before Lon, even

with his panther-like quickness, could spring for the pony's head, he was past the sheriff's cabin, and merged into the impenetrable darkness. Roberts and Lon, standing together, Roberts' revolver wavering as the sound of hoof-beats came, it seemed from all directions at once, heard the rattle as the unshod desert-beast crossed the strip of stones marking the town's northern boundary.

"He's gone into the desert!" Lon panted.

Taking the sheriff by the arm, he dragged him back into the hut.

"We're going after him," he announced, the lazy drawl quite gone from his voice, as with his thumb-nail he lighted a match and raised the lamp-chimney, "and going now. There'll be no brush dragged over *this* trail. Get your desert clothes on, Roberts—we're liable to be out all tomorrow, if I judge right. My canteens are filled; see that yours are."

Roberts already had his belt around him; now he reached for the heavy felt Stetson which alone can keep a man's brain from frying in the day-heat of the Colorado Desert summer. As he jammed it roughly over his brows, he saw Lon bend close to the lamp, as if examining some small object.

"What is it?" he demanded, pulling on his boots.

"Something that guy dropped," said Lon, in the jerky voice of a man absorbed in effort.

The shoe-laces flickering about his feet, Roberts stepped over to the lamp, and looked over the big man's shoulder. Lon, with all

the strength of his powerful fingers, was striving to open a tiny locket about the size of a quarter, made of thin gold and battered as if by much carriage in a pocket.

"Won't open," he snapped, and at that moment touched by chance the secret spring which controlled its catch. The golden lid flew back, and a tiny photograph lay under the two men's eyes.

Roberts, with a short cry of surprise, snatched the trinket and bent closer to the light. Then slowly he straightened himself, to find the eyes of Lanky Lon upon him.

"Well?" asked the man of the desert tensely.

Roberts held out the locket to him in the palm of one trembling hand.

"It's the girl!" he cried hoarsely, pointing to the miniature. "It's the girl!"

II

THE sun, a ball of intolerable incandescence, surged up over the eastern horizon. No dawn had preceded its appearance; no morning cool introduced the day. As if the door of some gigantic blast-furnace had suddenly been flung wide, a wave of blasting, withering heat sped across the desert, snatching into nothingness the few shadows that lingered in the hollows of the sand, and striking like a physical blow the faces of the two men sitting their horses on the slope of a hillock five miles into the desert from Pueblo Indio. The night wind which had snuffled around them during their night of trailing, hotly unbreathable as it had been, was too cool for the fearful dawn. For an instant it blew harder, like a miniature sirocco, hurling fine sand into the riders' eyes and throats, then it vanished altogether, leaving the stifling air with no other movement than the fantastic heat-shimmer which seemed to make the distant line of mountains dance and totter.

"H'm," said Lanky Lon thoughtfully. The young man at his side, not yet entirely salted to the desert, was staring as if fascinated at the sky's promise of a more than usually ferocious day. The lean man, his eyes crinkled into their protective narrowness, was paying

attention to nothing but the ground at his horse's feet. Like an uncoiling anaconda, he slid from his saddle, and still examining the sand, walked over to one of a scatter of creosote bushes. As he went, he drew a formidable knife from its sheath at his belt. With this he cut a moderate-size branch from a bush, and sliced from this stick half-a-dozen inch-long billets. As Paul Roberts turned toward him, he began to peel them. The sheriff's face was lined with anxiety. Ever since he had ridden out of Pueblo Indio by Lon's side, diffident about mentioning his private affairs to this unemotional-seeming stranger who yet claimed to have experienced emotions of his own, the young man had been racking his brain over the puzzle of the locket. The girl's face when he had seen it—her photograph, even—radiated honesty and refinement. Yet a memento of her was being carried by a man with reason to eavesdrop on officers of the law, a fighting desperado. At first, Roberts had clung to the idea that the battered locket had come into the possession of Lon's opponent as the proceeds of some robbery, but examining the tiny thing by the light of a match struck to help Lon follow the trail, he had noted a fact which ruined this theory. The little ring at the top of the trinket was freshly broken, obviously by the violent detachment of the locket from a chain on which it had hung. If it had hung on a chain, the man must have been wearing it. If he was wearing it, he must be intimate——

"What do you think you're playing at?" he asked with a forced smile. Lon had peeled all the little blocks of creosote-wood now, and was carefully wrapping them in the oiled paper from a package of tobacco.

"Why," said the desert man slowly, smiling back, "I'm just makin' a few li'l preparations, this life being uncertain, and nobody being able to tell what will happen next in order. These here are what I call greasewood plugs; their purpose in life being to quench the thirst while savin' the water-supply."

Roberts dismounted.

"I never heard of that trick," he said.

"Me neither," returned Lanky Lon, "for the first ten years I was around these parts. We live an' learn."

"But haven't we got enough water?" asked the sheriff, dropping one hand to the leather-bound bag which swung at his pony's flank.

"It ain't so much how much water we got," said Lon slowly, "as how long we're goin' to be out here." With a movement apparently slow, yet actually so rapid and sure as to give the general effect of a conjuring trick, he reached to his horse's side and detached a saddle-bag, from which he decanted on a flat rock the essentials of breakfast, complete even to matches in a waterproof box and salt, pepper, and sugar in three small aluminum cases. "That's what puzzles me."

The young sheriff stared.

"Why?" he asked.

With the careless expertness of long prac-

tice, his companion canted part of the contents of his coffee canister into the agate pot, and added sugar and a moderate quantity of the condensed cream which inhabitants of the desert carry, not as a luxury but as a medicine to counteract the fever-inducing effect of the alkaline water.

"See where them tracks go?" he asked, as he rose to draw water from his small pannikin. "Well, perhaps our horses've mucked them up a bit, so I'll tell you. They turn around this shoulder of the hill to the right. If you was to go around that corner an' pick some mesquite roots, you'd be liable to see where they're leading to."

The young man hesitated, puzzled.

"There's greasewood here," he suggested.

"An' there's a bullet somewhere else," said Lon, sternly, "for anybody who's so rash as to make a smoky campfire around here."

"We're watched?" demanded Roberts.

Lon took up the frying pan.

"Look here, young feller," said he, "I don't know whether we're watched or not; but I have been watched in my time, when I was young an' foolish like you, an' also when I was older an' considered myself to be smart. Now I've learned not to mind whether I'm actually bein' looked at or not, but always to act as if I was. An' if you'll get them roots, an' look about you while in the act, I will continue this lesson while the flapjacks fry."

Ten minutes later, tending the browning

batter as it sputtered over a small, intense fire skilfully kindled on part of the flat rock, he continued:

"Did you see?" he asked slowly, jerking the pancakes up and squinting at the fire, its flames invisible to Roberts' less experienced eye in the white glare of the sun.

"I saw that the country beyond here is cut up into about a million little valleys and canyons and so on," said the young man. "That's all."

"Technically known as a barranca," drawled Lanky Lon, engulfing a pancake and extending the pan across to Paul. "An' in this case, nicknamed all over the desert, the Miner's Hell. You know what that means?"

Roberts hesitated.

"It means," said the lean man, "that it's a little bit of country that the devil arranged so it's very easy to enter, an' very hard to get out of again. An' there ain't no water in it, nor no shelter from the sun—which means death!" Lifting his pannikin of coffee, he waved it at Roberts in a silent toast, and before drinking added, "From which we deduce a few things."

He did not detail them immediately, however. Instead, after drinking the scalding black beverage which Roberts as yet could not even lift to his lips, Lon refilled his pannikin, and while one hand reached forth for the last flapjack of his share, utilized the other to produce cigarette papers and tobacco. The sheriff of Pueblo Indio watched the movements of the right hand incredulously. The facility

of the strong brown fingers was amazing—like all of the big man's movements. While Lon's left hand fed him, his right expertly rolled the after-breakfast cigarette.

"This is the hill where you got shot, ain't it?" he asked, as his thumb tucked one edge of the brown paper under the other. "It being the only hill around here, you needn't stop masticating to answer. We therefore deduce that the person responsible for that unpleasantness, an' most likely for last night's also, is engaged in some illegitimate business in that barranca, and also that he ain't a native of these parts. If his business wasn't illegitimate, everything else aside, he wouldn't have taken the trouble to blot out his trail. If he'd been brought up around these parts, he wouldn't have lost his head an' shot you—an' missed. He'd simply have let you follow his trail into the barranca an' die naturally."

"How could he know——?"

"That you'd have followed it?" asked Lon. "He's liable to know all about the local sheriff, son, especially just how desert-wise he is. Besides, he knew what you were after——"

Roberts put down his pannikin and looked hopelessly at Lanky, and the big man lowered his eyes.

"An' now the question arises," he went on, as if proceeding with a painful but necessary speech, "whether this here is any business of mine."

"What?" cried the young man.

Lon looked up at him again.

"Son," he said kindly, his eyes from the deep shade of his heavy hat-brim confirming his manner, "I'd like to be of help to you. I ain't unsympathetic, believe me. I'd give as much as five dollars to see you find that girl all right—an' five shiners is some to me. I know you been thinkin' about her all night, an' I know you're pretty nigh in despair at the thought that she's most likely somewhere in that barranca, an' that you can't tackle it alone. But——"

"Can't I?" asked Paul Roberts tensely.

"If you attempt it," said Lon warningly, "you're a dead man. I've took a kind of a liking to you, kid, an' I tell you this. You ain't the first to try that barranca. There's bin supposed to be mineral in it—there's liable to be most anything, judging by what I've seen of it. When the volcanoes was mixin' the batter for this earth, that barranca got some of about everything there was goin'. Well, there's been twenty prospectors I've known of —desert rats, all of 'em—have tried that place. Do you know how many came out again? Two! And one of the two was crazy."

Roberts looked at him steadily.

"What were you saying before?" he asked, as if he had not noticed the horror of his companion's last speech.

Lon lit his cigarette.

"I was sayin'," he replied, "that if I was a free agent, I'd likely come with you, but I ain't. I'm an officer on a job, though I ain't got stripes down the legs of my trousers. An'

my job is what I told you—them Chinese. I followed a clue down to Pueblo Indio, an' to you, but there it petered out. I wish our trails lay together a ways, but they don't. I've come this far with you, kind of kiddin' myself this business might have somethin' to do with me, but I can't produce a single reason for goin' any farther. This is your private business, so far as I can see, an' my duty is to go back, take up the trail where I went wrong on it, an' get what the Government sent me for. Guess you see that."

Roberts nodded. After a piercing glance at the young man's averted face, Lon examined the end of his cigarette.

"That's what I meant when I said I didn't know how long we'd be out," he remarked. "I meant *you*. Figured you'd try that barranca, spite of all I could say. See you intend to. Don't blame you—much. Damn foolish, but—I'd do it myself. Well, you can have all the water. Goin' back without a trail to follow, I guess I can make two or three miles an hour, an' the greasewood plugs'll do me. An' —I hope you make out good."

The men's eyes met. Roberts stretched out his hand, and the loose-jointed man on the other side of the fire caught it in a crushing grip. Still holding the sheriff's hand, he rose to his feet, pulling the other with him like a child.

"I guess," he said, yawning and stretching, "I'll see you down past this slope. It's kind of exposed, an'——"

With one all-comprehending movement, he gathered the breakfast things together and stowed them loosely in the saddle-bag.

"Clean 'em later," he muttered, swinging to the saddle. "I got to water Pansy anyhow, an' there's a puddle at the foot of this hill—if it ain't dried up. Ready?"

They moved off slowly and in silence, and had reached the belt of rocks surrounding the base of the hillock before Lon spoke again. As they dismounted to lead their ponies, he coughed.

"If you're lost an' see a vein of mineral," he said, "follow it. It may lead you nowhere, but there's some leads to the edge of the barranca—like the icin' on a cake leads from the centre. One of them two men that was lost in here followed a streak of somethin' that looked like crimson quartz, he said. An' if you feel yourself slippin', don't take your clothes off. Most do, an' then they're goners. They're tryin' to get cooler, but they just burn up. An' if you're really all in—well, you got your revolver. It's easier."

Roberts looked at his adviser and nodded. A moment later they reached the puddle of which Lon had spoken—not quite dried up, a moist mud of sand and water. From this Pansy and Roberts' pony managed to snuffle up some seemingly satisfying drops, while their masters stood by in constrained silence.

At last Pansy raised her head, imitated a second later by the other horse. The sand at which they had been snuffling now showed

as dazzlingly white as the rest of the desert—and as dry. Roberts held out his hand again.

"Thanks," he said, quietly.

"Wish I could come," answered Lon, taking it. "Guess you know that. Here!"

Snatching off the packet of fodder which hung on his pony's withers, he handed it to Roberts. Pansy tossed her head and wickered. The other pony stretched out his neck and rested his soft nose for an instant on the little mare's neck.

"She wishes she was comin', too," said Lanky Lon. "That's her present to Montague, or whatever you call him. Nice horse."

"Not bad," said Roberts casually. "Well, good-by."

"Good-by," said Lanky Lon.

Without vain repetitions, and without looking back, he had ridden perhaps halfway up the side of the hillock down which he had just come, when he turned suddenly as the unmistakable sound of a revolver shot came to his ears. For an instant he sat still on his pony, listening. Then came two shots close together, then another shot, an interval, then two more, rapidly. It was the desert signal for attracting immediate attention. Instinctively, though his brows were corrugated with puzzling over what distress Roberts could be in a few minutes after his start, Lanky Lon turned Pansy's head and cantered downhill again. As he reached the moraine of rocks, Roberts, leading his pony by the bridle, appeared at the mouth of the canyon into which

he had plunged when he parted company with Lon. Neither man shouted across the intervening hundred yards. One shout in the desert is equivalent to the waste of a drink of water.

"Come with me," said Roberts in a low tone when Lon reached his side.

He vouchsafed no further explanation, and Lon wasted no time with questions. Together they led their ponies to where the canyon made a sharp bend to the right, while its left wall also broke into a dozen openings—the introduction to the maze of rock-lined declivities so deadly to the man they enclosed.

Roberts led the way round the right-hand curve, and as the two men turned the corner a sharp oath of surprise broke from the lips of Lanky Lon. Dropping Pansy's bridle, he hurried forward to the foot of a gigantic boulder, where, surrounded by irregular rocks of fantastically vivid colors, half buried in sand that glittered blindingly with mica, lay a human figure dressed in some garment of bright blue cloth. An instant later, when his powerful hands had raised the head, he was looking into the yellow face and the staring almond eyes of a dead Chinaman.

After a quick glance at the fingernails, he laid the body softly back and stood erect.

"This man's been dead no longer than since last night," he said grimly. "And he's not a rattlesnake case, either. No sign of it."

He bit his lip, then suddenly smiled at Roberts.

"I guess," he said, "I'll be with you after all. Now I want to know what this jasper died of."

He dropped to his knees, pushing his Stetson farther over the exposed back of his neck. The sun seemed, in the narrow defile, to double its awful heat. Rocks, sand, and sky reflected the searing rays. The blue linen which Lon's fingers were loosening at the Chinaman's neck might have been baked in an oven.

Roberts started over to join in the examination. Just as he neared Lon, however, the slow-moving giant sprang up and turned a face of horror toward him.

"For God's sake, look!" he gasped.

One glance was enough for Paul Roberts; then with a gasp, he turned away.

The face of the dead man before them was full-fleshed; showing no sign of frightful disease, and the horror before their eyes could not have been the work of human hands—there was no mark of a knife——

Yet from the shoulder-blade to the level of the heart, the dead man was a skeleton, and through the opening of the blue blouse his bare ribs, not yet bleached, stared at the pitiless sky.

Then as Lon stooped to cover up this unnatural terror again, something struck the boulder beside them with an impact that showered them with rock-chips, and a ricochetting bullet droned shrilly down the ravine.

III

NEITHER of the men moved, and an instant later there came to their ears the sharp report of a distant rifle—perfectly clear and recognizable, but diminished by intervening space to the volume of a sound in a phonograph. The ravine in which they stood, Roberts saw with one fear-sharpened glance, ran straight for more than the thousand yards which must have been the range of that shot. Its walls, niched in a million places by volcanic gas, naturally camouflaged in colors which made the brain reel and dotted here and there with sparse tangles of bluish smoke-bushes, could have sheltered an army of sharpshooters. At this instant a strange, squelching thud came from behind him. Spinning on his heel as the crack of the hidden rifle repeated itself, he saw Pansy, Lon's quiet little pony, strain up her neck as if in search of air cooler than that which shimmered off the stones, and drop her hind quarters to the ground in a helpless stagger. No wound could be seen, but from the water-bag slung over her hip jetted a stream which told of the doubly demoniac purpose of the distant-marksman. His aim was to leave them both waterless and horseless where the lack of either meant frightful death.

"Move!" yelled Lanky Lon in a voice that sent echoes beating around them.

His own huge frame woke instantly into incredible energy, he gave instructions as he moved. As he passed Pansy, one hand patted the dying animal's nose while the other drew the long sheath-knife from his belt.

"Cut the bags loose!" he cried, drawing his own blade over the rawhide thongs of his remaining reservoir. "We can't save the horses. That's right—keep the other side of your pony now——"

Staggering under the weight of one bag, Roberts obeyed the instruction. His knife had just bitten through the lashings of the other, when his horse shuddered, gave a little murmur, and dropped dead. Again the miniature report sounded—more terrifying in its minuteness and lateness than the thunder of a rifle close at hand.

"Down the draw!" gasped Lon, drawing his revolver to end the sufferings of his faithful four-footed companion. He hesitated for a moment, and looked away when he pulled the trigger. Then, as fast as they could for the bags which swung on their shoulders, the two men stumbled at a half-run toward the narrow gulley which opened in the canyon's other wall. One bullet from the distant rifle whiffed through the air over Roberts' head; another smashed among the stones at their feet. Then, gasping and groaning with the strain of such an effort in the appalling heat, they had gained the shelter of the draw. Rob-

erts dropped his two bags, careless for the moment of their contents, and was about to fall prostrate on a square of white sand half-shaded by a rock, when Lon caught his arm in a grip of steel.

"Don't lose your head," said the deliberate voice, its drawl broken by the big man's labored breathing. "If you're in one danger, don't forget there're others. Look where you lie down!"

Roberts dashed the sweat out of his eyes, and looked again at the strip of sand. In the center of it, coiled, almost sand-colored, distinguishable only by the icy eyes that stared unwinkingly upward, lay a rattlesnake.

"The Lord made shade, even here," said Lon, picking up a rock, "an' the devil countered by makin' these things so they couldn't stand the full heat of the sun. It's a good job you stayed in the Pueblo, young feller. Never lie down in the sand without lookin'."

The rock fell; the snake writhed for an instant, and then Lon, picking it up by its tail, threw it out into the sun and imperturbably seated himself in its place.

"Fittest survives," he said gravely. "Now somebody's tryin' to survive at our expense—that jasper up the split there. Sit down. Got any ideas?"

Roberts lowered himself cautiously.

"You ain't," said Lon calmly. "No more have I."

He picked up a handful of sand and let it run slowly through his fingers.

"Except, of course," said he, "that he's mining."

Roberts looked up sharply. It seemed strange to him to retire around the corner from violent death and forthwith start theorizing about irrelevant matters, but the protest that came to his lips was checked by Lanky Lon's smiling glance.

"This being proved," he continued amiably, "by his employing Chinamen—so many of 'em—an' being so all-fired anxious to keep strangers away. The question now arises, what in Tophet's he minin' for? Can't be gold; couldn't get it out of this barranca without a pony train. Can't be silver; same reason. Nor platinum."

"Besides which," said Paul Roberts, his voice showing something of the irritation of his nerves, "there isn't any platinum around here."

"Nobody knows," said Lanky Lon, taking another handful of sand and sifting it, "what there is around here. There's pretty nigh everything, as I told you—if you can find it."

"Well, for Heaven's sake," cried Roberts angrily, getting to his feet, "is this any time to discuss prospecting? When——"

Lon looked up at him.

"What do you want to discuss?" he said gently.

Roberts swept his arm around the dazzling white of the draw.

"How to get out of here!" he cried hoarsely. "How to get out—escape—get away——"

With one lightning-like motion Lon arose. His arm shot out, caught Roberts by the collar of his woolen shirt, and shook him violently.

"Listen to me," he said tensely. "You're startin' with craziness. Hear me? Let yourself go, an' in two hours you'll be drinkin' sand to try to quench your thirst. Listen to me!"

Viciously it seemed, he slapped the young man's face with his open palm. Roberts' eyes met his for some seconds like the eyes of a hypnotic; then, suddenly, as if a veil had snapped aside, they flashed into expression again. The sheriff of Pueblo Indio tore himself loose.

"What's the matter?" he asked indignantly.

"Sit down," said Lon.

"You was asking," he went on, when they were both seated, "why we didn't discuss gettin' out of here. While askin' it, you—well, do you remember gettin' up just then?"

Roberts' brow crinkled.

"I thought not," said Lon, taking another handful of sand. "Well, I was slapping you to wake you out of lunacy. Most jaspers get it at first when they come out here. I hope you're all right now."

Roberts stared at the quiet man, put one hand to the stinging places on his cheeks, and looked around the draw again. Something made him shudder violently; then as suddenly he smiled.

"Guess so," he said.

"Because," said Lanky Lon, "the reason we ain't discussin' the method of leavin' here is that there ain't any method, as I guess you'll agree after thought. We got no horses; we can't carry the water-bags a hundred yards ourselves. If we start without water—well, you know. Since we therefore got to stay here, we're discussin' the inhabitants of this barranca, an' deciding that to ask them for hospitality would be vain. See?"

A heavy silence fell, during which Roberts stared at Lon's face as if hoping this expert in the life of the desert was concealing the news of some exit from this impossible situation. It was death to go back, death to stay where they were, apparently death to go forward. Roberts, as he had shown in a dozen desperate fights in Pueblo Indio, was no coward. Menace by men he could face and combat; the deadlier menace of Nature, naked and impersonal, he could not appraise. Men who have faced machine-guns smiling will become panic-stricken in the Colorado badlands, where, it seems, the physical universe has risen in revolt. The human being, hitherto center of his own cosmos, shrinks in his own estimation; a man feels himself to be small, insignificant, helpless. His voice makes no impression on the silence; his strength has no effect on the distances. And most awful of all is the feeling that sun, water, and shade, by which the race has lived since it came upon the earth, have changed their character and become implacable enemies.

The sun, instead of warming, shrivels man up; water eludes him, or poisons him with mineral salts when he has found it; the shade entices him within reach of the fangs of snakes. The very earth on which he stands has heaved itself up into fantastic obstacles, barren of all the qualities of earth, and painted in colors which seem to bore through the eyes and into the very brain.

Lon watched Roberts carefully.

"We're in, an' we can't get out," he said slowly, "an' if I was you, sonny, I'd concentrate my thoughts on that long-distance goof with the rifle. You can't do anything against the desert, just as you're thinkin' at this moment; but you *can* get him."

"How?" asked Roberts eagerly.

Lon smiled and knocked the ash off his cigarette. Paul had come through the usual initial brain-storm very nicely.

"Ah," said the desert man, "that's just the question. Then, of course, there's that girl. Didn't you say your father had a mine around here?"

The breath Roberts drew was for the purpose of following up the question of the girl, but he managed his words as Lon threw out the last query.

"Somewhere here," he replied.

"Know what kind?" asked Lanky.

"I don't know anything about it," said Roberts, with an uneasy glance over his shoulder toward the canyon. "He said there was a mine and that he wanted me to look it over. I

studied for a mining engineer. As I told you, he was very secretive and——"

"You seem worried," said the big man. "'Fraid somebody's comin' sneakin' down that canyon to shoot you in the back?"

Roberts laughed confusedly.

"Because if so," said Lon, moving one careless hand and displaying as if by magic a revolver, "don't worry. Anybody that pipped you'd have to be in sight, an' if I saw him, he most likely would be persuaded not to fire. Yes. Strange I never heard of your father's mine. I aim to keep in touch with things. Did you ever hear anything of it after he died? Any mining men come back through Pueblo Indio, 'r anything? Anybody want paying off?"

Roberts shook his head.

"H'm" said Lanky Lon.

He stared at the end of his cigarette and meditated, his brows drawn together in a fine frown. Roberts, looking at the loose-jointed body, the tanned face with its expression of grave reserve, and the capable brown hands, felt a strange new sensation of security. The position seemed hopeless, but so long as this man could reflect on the end of his cigarette he felt the hand was not played out.

And then both together, the men in the shadow of the rock heard once more that far off rifle-crack. An instant later, from a distance up the draw, there came a hoarse cry of pain, and the thud of a falling body.

"Old Tin Whiskers," said Lanky Lon, uncoiling to his feet, "has made a ten-strike, rung the bell, and gathered in the lucky cigar. This is his busy day, ain't it? Give me that water-skin."

He drank a mouthful of the tepid fluid and handed the bag to Roberts.

"As easy as possible," he counseled. "Just take in as much as you'll sweat out in a hundred yards. That yell was from just up the draw."

"Are we going to him?" asked the sheriff, replacing the water-bag in the shade.

"I hope to meet the gentleman," said Lon, stepping out into the full blast of the sun, "and he ain't comin' to us, that's sure. Look out for that sidewinder!"

Fifty yards up the draw, a flea-bitten pony of the true desert breed was huddled, frightened, into a hollow of the rock; and, stumbling forward, their eyes almost closed against the dazzling white light, the two men saw ahead of them, at a point where the draw led into another canyon, a crumpled figure in faded khaki.

"Two driveways to the ogre's den, huh?" muttered Lon. "An' he sits at the window an' shoots down either of them. Nice, open-handed feller! Wait here."

Bursting for the short distance into a very tolerable imitation of a run, picking his way skilfully over the jagged stones, Lon dashed forward out of the draw into the fatal zone where the other man lay. Thanks perhaps

to his speed, or to the surprise of the watcher with the rifle, no shot greeted him. He swung the unconscious man to his shoulder and trotted back under cover. It was only when he laid his burden down, so that Roberts could take hold of the limp legs, that Lon saw the face of the wounded man.

"Billy!" he exclaimed.

There was more emotion in his face, for one moment, than Paul Roberts had suspected could show on those impassive features; then with a glance at his companion the big man mastered himself.

"Explain later," he muttered. "Take his feet. For God's sake," he burst out, "be quick an' let's get him into the shade!"

Ten minutes later, under the rock from which they had started on their expedition of rescue, when every means of restoring consciousness to the wounded man—even to the application of some priceless water to the groove along the top of his skull—had failed, Lanky Lon turned to Roberts.

"Listen," he said hoarsely, all that water I used is goin' to come out of my share——"

"Is it?" asked Roberts. Quietly and quickly he rose, took the bag, and dashed another pint of the water on the stranger's face. At this second shock of comparative coldness, the dropped eyelids fluttered, and the wounded man sighed faintly.

"In that case," Roberts explained quietly, "there's no objection to my contributing the same amount out of my share."

Lon, raising the bloodstained head in his arms, gave the young man a wild look.

"You're white," he said, "an' I'm goin' to do you dirt. Listen—this here's Billy Hawkins. He's a Government man—after this bunch, too, I guess. Roberts—I can't help it—a couple years ago this jasper saved my life. Not only that, he saved—saved something else for me. Look at him now; if he stays out here long with that wound, he's a goner. I got to get him help——"

"Where from?" asked Roberts.

"They can't be full-blooded savages up there," said Lon. "I'm goin' to wait till night, and then I'm goin' to put Bill on his pony an' take him up to the head of these ravines. An' if the guy that shot him won't help, I'll——"

"Well?" asked Roberts.

Lon looked down.

"I feel like a coyote," he said slowly, "but I can't help it. I'll have to leave you, Paul. This here guy's got the first claim."

"Sure," said Roberts, "but you won't have to leave me."

Lon shot a glance at the man who, half an hour before, had been over the borderline of the desert panic. Paul Roberts was rolling a cigarette with a steady hand, and smiling to himself.

"No," said the young sheriff, looking up and meeting the gaze of the gray eyes, "you misjudge me, Lon. I don't like our friend

the murderer either; but we started together, and together we stick."

"What?" asked Lon, incredulously.

"Yes, indeed," smiled Paul Roberts, "I'm coming with you."

IV

THERE was a moon that night, a pallid moon whose strangely greenish tint Lon explained as the result of a distant sandstorm. The death-like light it shed on the already infernal scenery of the barranca was purely and simply due, he demonstrated, to the presence of sulphur molecules in the air, to natural causes of no supernatural significance. Yet the desert detective's subconsciousness, like Roberts', responded to the eerie surroundings which his conscious mind disregarded, and as the two men finished strapping Billy Hawkins —now unconscious again—on his saddle, Lon spoke of the dead Chinaman.

"I should feel a whole lot better about this trip," he said slowly, hoisting a water-bag to where Billy's head could be pillowed on it, "if I knew what that guy died of."

"Me, too," said Roberts.

"Not knowing it," said Lanky, tugging at a knot, "it's nice of you to come with me."

"Nice of you to go," Roberts replied.

"Well," Lon told him, still casually, "it ain't so much to me. I'm kind of used to trouble. I got a name for getting into any that happens to be goin'—same as I told you. It's been alleged that if I got converted an' went to a prayer-meetin' to be followed by a

pink tea, it would transpire that the other converts was counterfeiters in disguise, that the principal deacon had murdered his grandmother, an' that the caterer had put arsenic in the gingerbread. Stand still, you hawse, you. You havin' been brought up quiet-like, it's nice of you to come where that Chink came from. He wasn't exactly encouragin' even to me."

"Well," said Roberts, "I'm not exactly disinterested, you know."

Lon finished the last inspection of his hitches and took the pony's bridle.

"I know," he said slowly, "but I thought I'd just mention my admiration in case—er—death us should part. Old Shot-at-a-Mile, the King of the Barranca, gives tests of a hasty temper. Well, are you ready?"

So they started. It was two hours later that they reached the point where the two canyons converged; and in spite of the comparative coolness of the night one of the water-bags was almost empty. For one thing, the breezes which had gone through the motions of cooling them on their ride from Pueblo Indio the night before failed to move the enclosed air of the barranca, and the baked stones radiated their heat stiflingly; again, the going over the floor of sharp-edged, shifting stones was cruelly hard in the deceptive light, and the distance was more than the thousand yards they had judged from the sound of the rifle-shots.

"Telescopic sights," Lon mumbled once, as they dragged their aching limbs around a buttress of rock which jutted, it seemed, for the sole purpose of embarrassing them.

Roberts, half asleep on his feet—for they were nearing the end of the journey—puzzled over this remark. It seemed irrelevant to the matter of the Chinaman, which had monopolized his thought since darkness fell. Immediately after the finding of the body there had been no time for cogitation; now the mystery had come upon him with compound force. Supposing that the barranca contained a mine, the presence of Chinese was not strange; considering the character of the men in command, a dead Chinaman was to be expected—shot, knifed, or clubbed. But not dead as this one had died—half-flayed by some unnatural agency. Not——

The pony had stopped in the shadow of another rock-buttress, and Lon was stooping, apparently busy with the right leg of his trouser. He was unlacing his boot and exposing his bare leg. With a thought of the soft, menacing rattles he had heard a dozen times during the journey, as the approach of the pony had scared sidewinders from their nests under the rocks, Roberts sprang forward with his knife drawn. Lon motioned him back.

"Keep quiet," he said softly, "I'm all right. Just securing a little personal property, Paul. Sweet Charles of Old Colorado is liable to preface his hospitality by frisking us, and I

aim to complicate his job. Feel under Billy's shirt, will you, and bring any metal object you happen to encounter?"

Roberts obeyed. As his hand, passing over the wounded man's heart, encountered a badge pinned to the undershirt, Billy Hawkins started in his stupor, and with a vaguely outflung hand tried to defend it. Lon, hurrying over, calmed him with low-spoken words.

"We're kind of touchy about our badges," he said, apologetically. "You left your star at home, didn't you? Well, it's less for me to carry."

He bent again, and added Billy's badge to the collection of objects he had already attached to a small strap. Roberts could discern two badges, a small white cube apparently wrapped in paper, and a small, flat tin box. To these, delving into a pocket, Lon added a small revolver.

"It was given me," he remarked, "by a lady who decided not to break the law after all, and has been remarkably useful. It ain't shucks for accuracy, but it shoots a .32, and at close range will penetrate the human epidermis. Furthermore, it will fit—" he buckled the strap around his leg just above the knee—"into the natural curves of the underpinning, thereby avoiding publicity. Together with the matches, our warrants for official action, and——"

He stopped, and proceeded with the relacing of his legging.

"And the little white packet?" said Roberts questioningly.

"Yeh," answered Lon, "and the little white packet—as you say. G'on, hawse."

They rounded the buttress, and advanced perhaps two yards into the pool of moonlight on the other side. Then, cutting the silence like a knife, one sharp word came to the ears —spoken close to them apparently, and from some height.

"Stop!"

They stopped dead.

"And now," said the voice above them, "do me the favor to stay stopped. If quite convenient, you might even elevate your hands. If either of you has rheumatism and can't, I will put him out of misery."

Lon and Roberts obeyed.

"There's one of us who can't," said Lon.

"He is excused," said the voice, with a chuckle. The guardian of the canyon was gloating over his shot of the afternoon and Roberts saw Lon's open hands clasp themselves into fists.

"I am coming down to you," said the voice pleasantly, "but don't presume on it. I have a son—a clear-eyed youth, gentlemen, with a very steady hand. He will hold the rifle."

There was a clink of steel and the sound of muttered instructions. Then rocks began to clatter under the feet of a man descending from some perch in the wall of the canyon opposite to them. Lon, his head bent, his eyes on the ground, seemed to be concentrat-

ing his faculties on listening to the direction of the confused sounds. Roberts, strangely collected now that the peril amid which they had moved since last night had been brought to a focus, looked around him. There was no sign in the moonlight of the glint of the rifle barrel which he felt was in fact leveled at them, but he could guess, fairly accurately, its location. The canyons down which they and Billy Hawkins respectively had entered the barranca were in the form of a wishbone, and joined at this point, after the fashion of so many blind alleys of the bad-lands. In the terminal wall of the two ravines—the wall from which the sentinel watched both approaches—was a jagged cleft, leading apparently still further into the maze of the barranca.

And it was from this cleft that there issued, at this moment, the extraordinary figure of the man who had spoken to them from above.

It was difficult for Roberts to believe at first that his eyes were serving him faithfully, or, when the ambling stranger came nearer, that the desert had not in fact snatched away his reason. Ever since they came within the sphere of this man's influence death had filled the air; yet the man himself, picking his way toward them in the slow, methodical manner of the benevolent aged, resembled more than anything a tropical version of Father Christmas—chubby face, bright eyes, and white beard complete—but with a linen coat and trousers substituted for the conventional red

robe, and a pith helmet for the ermine trimmed hood. Glancing at Lon as this apparition came to a stand before them, his short, plump body throwing an almost circular black shadow at their feet, Paul saw that the usually imperturbable Westerner shared his surprice. In fact, his raised hands sank a few inches from their elevation, and from above them there sounded instantly the menacing click of a breech-block.

"Don't be nervous, Ronald," said the old man before them genially. "These gentlemen are experienced. They know what they'd do if someone disobeyed them in these circumstances, and they won't be rash."

With a gentle fussiness which seemed to make his actions playful, the speaker reached forward and removed the revolvers and the sheath knife from Lon's belt, then performed the same office for Roberts. Stuffing the weapons into his own pockets, he then felt gently under their arms, and finally patted each of them exploratively on the left breast. This done, he turned to the limp figure of Billy Hawkins. The unconscious man's revolvers gleamed at his belt, but Father Christmas, as Roberts already called him in his mind, disregarded them. His whole attention seemed to be focussed on the roughly bandaged top of Hawkins' head. Suddenly, with a gnomish viciousness that startled the watchers, he snatched off the bandage and exposed the wound to view.

"Ronald!" he cried out, with a cackle of

triumph, "I was right! I just stunned him neatly! You should see!"

As if warned by a sixth sense, the old man swung on his heel. One of Roberts' revolvers showed in his hand.

"I daresay you resent this," he snarled, with a complete change from his former affability. "Let me warn you that one move means your death. You came here without invitation, and you'll not be allowed to be finicky."

"If you'd been a better shot," drawled Lon with a steely undertone which Roberts noted, "there'd have been no question of that. But you touch that man again, and I'll break your neck before your bullet inconveniences me, old Face-ache. I've come here because he needed medical attention; an' if he ain't going to get it anyway, I shan't be particular about whether I go away again or not. Get that, Fungus?"

The old man hesitated a moment.

"I think," he said after a moment, with a menacing return of his former geniality, "that you don't quite understand your circumstances, my friend. You think it is my desire to kill you; it is not. Later, I will have certain men you probably know assure you of the fact. While not a William Tell, pray believe that I could have shot either of you perfectly dead yesterday with greater ease than I perforated your water-bags and your horses. Or I could have shot your friend through the lungs much more easily than I gave him con-

cussion of the brain, had I not wanted to capture you alive."

He chuckled. And at that sound, Roberts' heart, which had seemed to grow cold within him during the speech, sank perceptibly. That was the chuckle of a fiend—a ghoul; the proper expression, the final summing up of a man who could coolly shoot away the water that meant men's lives, and horses that meant their chance of a fight for life, in order to trap the men themselves. Now that the benevolent-looking old gentleman was in the full light of the moon, his face turned toward the greenish glow, his chubby face seemed to have undergone a terrible transformation. His small eyes, half hidden by his plump cheeks, were cold and beady—horrible in their dissociation from his other features and the sound of his voice; and his nose, instead of being broad, was narrow and slightly hooked like the beak of a hawk.

"Your friend here," he added, "will get the best of attention. I have been a doctor myself. In fact, you will all get the best of attention. You must be strong, Ronald, they must be strong, mustn't they?"

For the first time during the interview, the watcher up in the cliff gave his opinion. It was wordless. He merely laughed, a saturnine rattle that would have done honor to one of the little snakes of the canyon.

"The purpose being?" asked Lanky Lon slowly.

"To work, my dear sir," said Father Christ-

mas benevolently, "or to look handsome as a corpse—just according to your tastes in the matter. And now it's time we were moving. Take that man off that horse!"

He snapped out the last words and, as Lon and Roberts obeyed him, returned to the gentle tone as if he had never left it.

"By carrying him between you," he went on, "you will be moved from temptation to use your hands wrongly; and besides, the horse has other uses. Go straight toward the cleft in the rocks, if you please. I shall follow you, a revolver in either hand, and the moonlight assisting my naturally keen eyesight."

The crash of a shot behind them made the two men glance back. Billy Hawkins' pony had fallen forward on its knees. As they looked, it rolled over to its side, kicked feebly, and died.

"Billy Hawkins," said Lon very slowly indeed, "was kind of fond of that hawse, mister. He will be peevish at you for that."

The white-bearded man came close to them, and poked him in the back with a gun-muzzle.

"Not when he needs food, surely?" he asked. "Horse is very nourishing, I assure you, and it is all the meat you will get. Tomorrow, if the sun has not been too much for them, we will bring your horses up, too. You will meet them again, without waiting for heaven. Oblige me by stepping briskly. Ronald, you can come down. I think our office-hours are

over for today. When you reach the cleft in the rock, do me the favor, gentlemen, to wait for my son."

More agile than his father, the man who had laughed slid down a rocky slope and stood before them, rifle in hand. The cleft was dark, but both prisoners could identify by his bulk and his mode of motion their eavesdropper who had fought Lon at Pueblo Indio. Dimly they made out that his jaw protruded —as his father's did, perhaps, under that charity-like white heard—that his upper lip was long and adorned with a scrub of dark moustache, and that the general contour of his face was flat, surmounted by a low brow which added to the gorilla-like impression generally conveyed by his body.

Raising his hand, without the slightest warning or cause, the newcomer struck Lon a heavy blow in the face.

"That's for you," he said, with a snigger. "You swine!"

"Ronald," came the soft voice of his father, as the muzzle of a revolver pressed meaningly into the small of Lon's back, "you forget yourself."

"No, I don't," snarled the younger man. "He stole my locket off me—my pretty locket, with Joyce's face in it. I dropped it when you sent me to listen at the sheriff's door. I've looked everywhere, and I can't find it, and I'm going to keep hitting him till he gives it back to me."

Two facts impinged on Roberts' conscious-

ness. First—he knew at last the name of the girl he was following into this awful situation; secondly and horribly, this man before them, this co-director of their fate, was an idiot—not an imbecile or a maniac, but a type of the lowest mentality. Roberts had felt from the first moment of the older man's appearance that in the father they confronted a mind of strange power, unscrupulous in its superiority to the average mental equipment of mankind. As often occurs in such cases, nature had adjusted the balance. The supernormality of the father was compensated by the subnormality of the son.

"Leave them alone!" barked the man behind them, as the dark figure raised its arm again. "Get forward, will you? Ronald, show the way!"

Muttering and grumbling, the ape-like son slouched ahead, bringing a flashlight to bear unsteadily on the ground. With the limp weight of Billy Hawkins between them, with the occasional bump of revolver muzzles into their spines, with only that wavering ray to enable them to avoid broken ankles on the jagged path, Lon and Roberts, staggering onward, could spare few glances for their surroundings. They had a vague impression that the cleft continued for some hundreds of yards, and that at irregular distances it widened into bays such as might have been made by prospectors, testing the sheer walls for mineral. The cliffs through which it ran towered high; at points their skyward edges

met; at others they were far enough apart to let in flecks of the ghastly moonlight.

Then suddenly the cleft widened into another canyon and the staggering bearers of the wounded man felt their feet on smoother going. They raised their eyes, and perceived themselves to be standing a hundred yards away from what seemed to be a village. Incredible as any human habitation appeared in this supposedly uninhabitable wilderness, here were a dozen or more houses built of stone and clustered around a much larger house which stood nearest to the observers, at the head of the central street.

"Keep moving, I beg of you," said the affable voice behind them, as they paused at this astounding sight. "We are nearly home, but not quite."

They went on, more quickly now. This canyon was wider than the one up which they had traveled to surrender themselves; also, its walls were higher, and apparently of an entirely different rock—a formation which Lon, staring at it in the moonlight, never remembered to have seen before in all his traveling of the Colorado Desert. It was shiny in some places, rough and crumbly in others; hard as granite, judging by the manner in which it had fractured under the stresses of nature, and of a peculiar color.

The idiot swung open the door of the big house for them, and as Lon passed him, gratified his viciousness by a savage kick at the big man's ankle.

"Ronald!" said Father Christmas chidingly. "Don't be silly. Light the lamp."

A few seconds later Billy Hawkins was lying on a rough couch in one corner, breathing stertorously, the old gentleman with the white beard had seated himself at a sort of desk made of flat stones, and Roberts and Lon, handcuffed by the sullen son—who managed to catch an agonizing bit of flesh into each lock as he snapped it to—were standing under the swinging lamp, to be disposed of at their captor's pleasure. Roberts, casting back in his mind while the old man considered them, his lips smiling, his small black eyes as cold as death, regretted for an instant his throwing in of his lot with Lon's in this section of the adventure. And then he thought, left alone in the draw, death would have been certain and slow. Again, Lon had helped him before he knew that his own mission lay along the same line, and finally—Joyce was here. Joyce! Yet, persistently in the back of the young man's mind was the picture of that dead Chinese, and the horror disclosed by his open blouse. How had he died? How?

"We can do little tonight, I fear," said the old man regretfully. "I should like to have started you to your duties right away, but our gangs are forced to take rest. Such is the frailty of the human constitution. Ah me!"

"The duties being?" asked Lon casually.

"Why," said Father Christmas, playing with a paper-knife, "as you doubtless have guessed, we are a mining concern—in a small way.

And, as our paternal Government seems to have found out, we employ a few harmless Chinese—the climate being what it is. And since they are, sad to say, far from conscientious, we need foremen to keep them to their tasks. Our foremen are a fine body of men—or were. Just now they are somewhat homesick, and some few of them are pretending to be seriously ill. You will join them."

"What you mining?" asked Lon abruptly, as if to counteract with his own brusqueness the sickening effect of the old man's rounded periods.

"You will find out," said their captor, with a slow smile. The idiot sniggered. "You will find out soon enough. Ronald, show them to a hut."

"How about him?" asked Lon, indicating Billy Hawkins.

The man at the desk rose and waddled over to the couch. Skilfully he rolled back an eyelid and noticed the reflex action as he touched the eyeball. Then lifting Billy, he examined the wound in his scalp, laid him back, and nodded amiably at the two prisoners.

"He will be working as well as any of you in a couple of days," he said, turning and remedying his failure to disarm the unconscious man. "He will stay here tonight. And by the way, dear sirs, let me beg you to stay where *you* are—or where you will be put. My son seems not to have taken a fancy to you, and he might forget to mention that, though that way of escape will seem easy, it

is not safe to leave your hut. Take them to the nearest one, this side, Ronald, and don't annoy the gentlemen."

"They——" began Ronald sulkily, picking up a revolver.

"Shoot them if they're rash," said his father sweetly, "but the Green Chamber will annoy them quite enough. Eh, Ronny?"

"The Green Chamber—yes," said Ronald dully. Then a grin split his face. "Oh, yes, father—ha-ha-ha! The Green Chamber'll annoy them! Ha-ha!"

Bellowing with laughter, he pushed his victims before him, out of the door and across a twenty-yard stretch of packed rock-fragments to the nearest of the huts which composed the body of the village. All of these hovels were alike—low, scarcely high enough for anything but a man lying down, and showing in the moonlight like huge beehives of stone.

"Get in," chuckled Ronald. "There's the door, you! That hole in the side there. Get down and crawl. Ha-ha! You'll crawl when you've been in the Green Chamber! You'll crawl anywhere where you think it'll be dark, and you'll never find any darkness anywhere. Get in!"

The entrance he indicated was no more than a low archway, perhaps three feet high. There was no indication on the outside of the hut of any opening for ventilation. If this orifice were closed, Roberts thought feverishly as he crawled in—his hands tingling with the fear of the unseen floor of the place, greasy to

the touch from previous habitation—they would suffocate before morning. Perhaps it would be better if they did. How had the Chinaman died? How?

But the intention was not to close the doorway. Ronald, after kicking Lon savagely as the big man crushed himself through the opening, went away for a moment and returned with a strange-looking box. It was like knife-boxes Roberts had seen back East, with a raised back by which the sniggering jailer carried it. The length of this object was just the width of the doorway, the height of its back perhaps half the height of the opening. Ronald set it across the orifice, fastened it in place by some contrivance fixed in the wall for the purpose and, chuckling, drew off some kind of cover which had closed the body of the box. The two men within, crouching to save their heads from contact with the jagged curve of the hovel's roof, could look out at him through the remaining eighteen inches of the entrance. They were barred in, it seemed, by nothing more substantial than a wooden box. The idiot told them so, and invited them to come out. He laid his revolver on the sand and promised he would not use it. Finally, laughing, he went away.

Instantly Lon struck a match he had drawn from the hidden box while their tormentor mocked them, and examined with a lightning glance the interior of their prison. There was no escape save through the doorway. The stones of the place were well laid, and plas-

tered in the chinks with an adobe-like clay that had baked to the hardness of the rock itself. Thanks to the thickness of the walls, however, the hovel was cool—cooler than any place they had found so far. Somehow, freedom from that most stupefying of human discomforts—great heat—seemed to stimulate both prisoners. Lon, feeling for Roberts' hand after the match was out, gripped it with vise-like pressure that denoted surviving hope.

"If we do get out of here," he said, slowly as usual, "it'll have been worth my while, professionally speaking, to have come. I know this geranium with the whiskers. He came an' lectured once at the University of California, time I was there learning a few things outa books for once. It was six years ago, but I remember the garden-stuff. Anyhow, I never forget a face. Professor Jonas Crewe. Look nice on a warrant."

"Crewe—Jonas Crewe?" cried Roberts.

Lon's hand fell on his knee.

"Do you know anything about him?" he demanded tensely.

"My father knew him," said Roberts. "They used to have long conferences together. I believe—yes, it was about mining!"

Lon sat in silence for a moment.

"Oho," he said at last. "Oho! So that's why Crewe didn't let on to recognize you when we met. I knew he must have known you, from your having followed the girl. He treated you as a stranger because he knows you too well. Unless I'm right off the trail, young

feller-me-lad, this is your father's mine here, and Crewe was here workin' it when your pa died. Since that event he's stolen it, and stayed on workin' it for his own profit."

"It was supposed to be worthless," said Roberts.

"Supposed," said Lon. "And who did the supposin'? Who wrote the reports back East? Crewe! That's why your dad was sendin' you out."

Roberts breathed hard. "This shack's built of the rock they're mining," he said suddenly. "What is it?"

"I don't know," came the slow drawl from the darkness; "I ain't got the least idea. I figured I knew all the ores around here, but this stumps me. I never saw anythin' like it. I looked when the match was lit. It's a mystery like—like——"

He did not need to finish.

There was a heavy silence, and then Lon crawled over to the doorway.

"Guess there's no harm in lookin' out," he began, and then started back from the doorway as if the wooden box so close to him had given him an electric shock.

"God!" he gasped, and was silent. In the box Roberts seemed to hear a dry whirring sound, and the violent tapping of some hard yet padded object on the wood.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Nothin'," came the drawl again, with a slight tremor in it. "I ain't hurt. Just a bit shaken by our friends' idea of a doormat."

Roberts heard the lanky frame ease itself down to a comfortable position on the dirt floor.

"That little box," said Lanky Lon, casually, "is full of rattlesnakes."

V

THEY passed an agonizing night. In the first place, they did not know until the light of dawn shone in at the creep-hole that the high back of the snake-box was curved to overhang its deadly contents and prevent the serpents from invading the hut. Then again, as the night wore on the air of the rock kennel in which they lay became foul with their continued breathing—almost poisonous to men accustomed to sleeping in the open. Between watchfulness for reptiles, semi-suffocation, and apprehensive wonder as to what was to befall them on the morrow, they lay achingly awake through the hours before morning. When the first red streaks appeared in the sky, sending a pink glow even into that miserable prison, Lon, who had at last fallen into a half-stupefied doze, roused himself. Scratching like a terrier in one corner of the hut, he carefully buried and covered up the treasures he had strapped to his leg.

"You want to notice where those are, Paul," he said quietly, lying down again, "because there's just one chance in ten thousand of our escape, and these objects are it. For another thing, here's three of them greasewood plugs for you. Water's liable to be scant around

here—half as much as you need being the reward for work that no man can do, or something like that. And for God's sake, if old Waterfall Whiskers comes sniffin' around to see if you got any suspicions about him havin' stolen your dad's property, pretend to mistake him for the Prophet Isaiah, or the President or something. Right now, he figures to kill us at a profit to himself, an' that gives us time. If you let out that you know him, he'll likely take no chances. Get that?"

"Yes," replied Roberts. Then diffidently, "Guess you've got no particular idea about how we're going to get out of this?"

Lon drew a long breath and exhaled it.

"In a general way," he said, "I figure we'll get out of it about like I've emerged from other little adventures before. The great comfort about havin' a character like mine is that, no matter how bad you get in, you can generally look back an' see a worse place you got out of."

"You've been worse fixed than this, for Heaven's sake?" asked Roberts.

"Yeah," said Lon briefly. And added, "But as for particular ideas about this business, there's several things I want to know first. One's who these other white men old Benevolent Butchery was talkin' about, are, another's——But it don't matter. Right now all I've got is a hunch that we ain't goin' to die right here, working for Mister Professor Crewe, at least me an' Billy Hawkins ain't. There was a kind of fortune-teller we run out

of a town once that prophesied we'd both be hanged—an' there ain't no trees here. As for you—it'll depend on how well you can keep your mouth shut."

"Isn't there anything we can *do,* though?" Roberts demanded.

"Might say a few prayers," suggested Lon gravely.

After which they sat in silence, occasionally turning their stiffened limbs on the hard floor, watching with smarting eyes the growing whiteness of the daylight. Judging by the angle of the sun, it was about six o'clock when the footsteps of several men approached their hut. Two, laughing over some joke, passed on; one paused at their doorway. He put the cover on the snake box and removed it.

"Get out!" roared a voice that was strange to them.

They crawled forth. During the night they had discussed the possibility of defying their captors from the interior of the beehive, and dismissed the possibility instantly. Even with the unsuspected revolver on their side, they would have had not an instant's chance of success. Scrambling to their feet, Lon and Roberts found themselves face to face with a brutal-looking white man over whose arm hung two rough suits of overalls.

"So you're the new guys—the Government bulls, are ye?" he asked with a sneer.

"No," said Roberts.

Instantly the blackguard dropped his bur-

den and sent his fist to Paul's jaw with a force that knocked him, half dazed, to the sand. Before Lanky Lon, whose lips had suddenly tightened, could move, a heavy revolver was under his nose.

"You contradict me, you scum," snarled the bully, "an' I'll cut your ears off. Blow's my name—Jake Blow, late of one of your damn Government jails—and Blow's my nature. You're in my gang, and you got a right to start thinking of me like a king. Er else you'll wish you'd never bin born, you——".

With a string of horrible epithets, he raised his boot and drove it twice into Roberts' side. His revolver muzzle still covered Lon's heart unwaveringly; but with a growl of fury the lean man had gathered himself for a spring when deliverance came from an unexpected quarter. Paul, lying half-conscious, his face on the sand, his eyes dully taking in the spectacle of the blue-bloused Chinese being herded out of the other beehives by the other two overseers, suddenly heard a sharp swishing sound which ended in a thud and a hoarse yell of pain from the brute above him. Rolling over, as his tormentor checked an oath at its beginning, the young man woke to full consciousness.

Before him, a blacksnake whip in her hand, and a blaze of anger in her eyes, stood the girl of Pueblo Indio—Joyce. For an instant he fancied that her eyes flashed down to him; then they returned to the pain-contorted face of the man who had kicked him.

"You forgot your whip—and your manners, Blow," she said levelly. "I've brought you them both. Put that gun back in your belt. Put it back, I say!"

Her small foot, booted in a high-heeled riding shoe, stamped, and the lash of the whip moved threateningly. Jake, with a despairing glance at the big house where Crewe and his son lived, replaced the gun.

"And mind what I say," the girl went on steadily, "and don't let anyone make you forget it. If you try any tricks with these men, I'll blacksnake you if fifty uncles tried to stop me." She flung the whip at his feet and stepped back. His face black with rage, Jake stooped for it, and with the same motion tossed the overalls at his victims.

"Get these on," he muttered in a thick voice.

Roberts staggered to his feet, and his eyes met the girl's. She was not the Amazon she had appeared a moment before. Her eyes were large and gray, her face finely formed and delicate, her hair ashily golden, and wonderful as it showed under her broad-brimmed hat in the sunlight. The only sign of her ability to cow such a man as Blow was in her mouth, whose scarlet lips, beautifully cut, came firmly together, their expression of determination unmarred by a dimple which persisted in showing at each corner. She wore, like most of the women of the open, a khaki shirt, the collar turned back to show her sunburned throat, a short whip-cord riding

skirt of the same color, and a gun-belt from which hung—looking absurdly large for her tiny brown hands—a pair of heavy riding-gauntlets. Lon, taking in these particulars at a glance, noted also that the invariable appurtenance of such a costume—the revolver—was missing from the belt. The girl was a prisoner—like themselves. Yet she had been in Pueblo Indio alone that day, according to Roberts. He raised his eyes to search her face, just as she smiled slightly at Roberts and turned away.

"Get into them overalls," snarled Jake Blow, his voice muffled with rage. "An' don't think," he added in a lower tone, "that any skirt's goin' to get you anything with me. Generally we break men in gradually, but you're goin' into the Green Chamber today. Get into them clothes!"

Lon, quite disregarding the quivering blackguard before him, followed Joyce with his eyes until she passed out of sight into the house, then rapidly undressed, Roberts following his example. Before they donned the rough work-clothes, Blow, sticking his whip into his belt, searched them thoroughly.

"There was a guy came in here with a gun slung on the middle of his back," he said as the prisoners dressed themselves. "We heated that gun red-hot, and tied it back again. That's what we're liable to do around here, my bucks, when people try tricks on us. You want to forget about there bein' a law against slavery, so long as you're here, an' when you

get away from here you won't remember nothin'. Get along!"

He did not strike them with the whip—merely made the lash sing through the air around them, and then poked each viciously in the small of the back with the stock. They marched forward, Roberts a little unsteadily, toward where, lined up before a double row of huts, stood the most horrible miniature army ever beheld by the eye of man.

The inhabitants of the huts were divided, as it were, into platoons of about a dozen men each. There were seven such groups. The great majority of the men composing them were Chinese, but with a tightening of the heart Lon observed that at the left of each group, handcuffed like the rest to a chain which joined the members of each gang, stood a white man. It was only after several seconds of keen examination that Lon discerned the difference in nationality; for, as if wasted by some horrible sickness, all the men before him, except the three overseers, were reduced almost to the international mean of skeletonization. The faces of the white men, in their fleshlessness, showed cheek-bones as high as the Mongols'; the superior Caucasian height seemed to have shrunk, and most ghastly of all, the eyes of every man in the ragged ranks were alike in their sunken redness. Strangely inflamed, they glared with an unseeing intensity which unnerved Lon. They were not blind, for one white man, turning his head so that the incandescent sun struck into his face,

flung up his chained hand in an agonized gesture, to shield his eyes. Yet they could not see. Among even the most hopeless of prisoners, there is interest in the induction of a new fellow-sufferer. These wretches stood with their heads bent, vouchsafing Lon and Roberts no upward glance.

It was just as Blow, having thrust Roberts toward a group which was being handcuffed by another overseer, snapped the handcuff at the end of another line on Lon's left wrist that the desert man proved the truth of Crewe's words of the night before. There had been something familiar in the gesture of the man who had shielded his eyes. Going on memory of that gesture more than on further evidence drawn from the man's features, Lon recognized the ghost now standing at his right hand. As a rule, the white men were separated from each other by the mute Chinese of their sections; here there had been some confusion, caused by the arrival of the new prisoners.

"Harry!" whispered Lanky Lon without moving his lips. "Harry Manley! This is Lanky. Lanky Lon of Valleciots. Harry!"

The bent figure with the blind face showed no surprise, did not start. It seemed to have no energy, no interest in anything.

"Yes?" came the ghost of Harry Manley's voice unemotionally. "Then God pity you."

Before Lon could add anything to cover up these ominous words, Blow stood before him.

With a rough push, he threw Manley staggering against the Chinese of his section, and then snatching the hat from Lon's head, he put it with Roberts' sombrero, which he held in his left hand. Lon felt the morning sun strike a menacing shaft of heat through his long hair, to his scalp. In five minutes, he knew, if he were kept where he stood, that red-hot ray would search his brain.

"Not bein' in the sun, you won't need hats," said the overseer, "an' goin' into the Green Chamber, you won't need any clothes very long. You be careful of them overalls. Only one man's died in 'em yet, an' we're expecting quite a few of you detectives along. What the hell are you standin' starin' at me for? Get along!"

He yelled at Roberts, who forthwith started over toward him, his hands upraised to form some sort of shield for his bare head. The Chinese who dragged after him were protected to a man by thick mats of black hair, from which their pigtails, unplaited and unbound, straggled grotesquely. A Chinese will cheerfully die before he lets even a fuzz of hair appear on his bald head. The mops which hung over the eyes of these macabre figures testified appallingly to their degradation. Lon felt something of the same sort creeping upon him. With a powerful effort of the will, as he followed Blow, who strode ahead, Lanky forced himself to think of the badge buried in the corner of the hut. It was polished until it shone: Lon had had a vague

idea that its spotlessness typified his past record as an officer of the law. He must live up to that badge, polished himself——

His thoughts were beginning to run wild. It was the heat. He raised his hands, as Roberts had done, and found his hair almost too hot to touch. There was a strange feeling in his skull, too. Blow turned around at the sound of the jangle of the handcuffs, and laughed hoarsely.

"You'll soon be in shelter," he sneered. "Round this corner!"

By this time, the woeful procession had reached the westerly wall of the canyon in which the village stood. Glancing back, Lon saw that the other gangs, two in charge of one overseer, three led by another, were trailing off toward other sections of the same rock wall. As he looked, a man at the end of one chain broke from the line and began to run wildly about, dragging at the shackles, and halting the section. The overseer, his hand to his belt, ran toward him. Lon turned away, sickened, and a powerful shudder shook him. He heard in imagination the dull thud of the revolver shot before it came to his physical ears. No example was needed to show that the man whose usefulness was over would be shot like a dog. He remembered to have read in a two-months-old paper he had found by a deserted camp-fire that in a populous Southern state, comparatively speaking in the heart of civilization, a planter had been found killing off his illegal slaves as if they had in fact

been farm animals. And if that could happen there——

He turned the corner Blow had indicated. Instantly he was in a pitch darkness upon which, to his sun-dazzled eyes, Blow's electric torch could make no impression. He stumbled over a rock and fell heavily, the Chinese behind on top of him. Blow bellowed with laughter as he jerked him to his feet.

"Not enough light, eh?" he roared. "Well, you'll have plenty in a minute. An' don't you go fallin' again, or I'll kick you up next time. Get on!"

They stumbled forward slowly and painfully. The way seemed long, though the passage in the rock was in fact barely a hundred yards. At last Blow stopped, laid a rough hand on Lon's arm, and brought the laboring gang to a halt.

"Now then, d'you see anythin'?" he demanded.

Too breathless to answer immediately, the loose-jointed giant he addressed strained his eyes into the darkness ahead. Blow had snapped off the ray of his torch, and the blackness was intense, save for a faint greenish haze, which at first the desert man ascribed to the sun glare in his own eyes. But as he blinked, the glow did not persist. Memory of the threat of "the Green Chamber" came to him. He was seeing the beginning of it.

"Kind of a green light," he admitted.

Blow gave a chuckle.

"Well, suppose you go ahead till you reach

where the light is," he suggested. "Here's the whip. You'll find barrows an' tools right by the Chamber. Your job's to see they get filled quick. Usin' the whip's one way of doin' it, an' workin' yourself's another. You better use both, when you get the four barrows full, you're through. An' if it ain't done quick, look out!"

He chuckled again.

"Aren't you coming with us?" asked Lon slowly.

"Haw-haw!" bellowed Blow. "They all ask that. No, I ain't. I'm a bit too valuable to this here concern. I'll sit here an' smoke. But—" his grip crushed Lon's wrist—"I'll be here when you come out, an' I'll take the whip back then. An' if you ain't on time—— Well, get ahead. Mush!"

Lon heard him snarl a similar injunction to Roberts as the sheriff of Pueblo Indio came level with the place where the brute had stopped. A few seconds later, Lanky had turned another bend in the corridor and came face to face with the strangest sight of his experience—a spectacle which, even in the first second of his acquaintance with it, impressed him with a certain deadly quality. The Green Chamber. As far as he could see it was nothing more than a natural cavern, roughly cubical, blown into the rock by the gases of the age when the earth was molten; ten yards wide, about, and a little less in height, its sidewalls showing by their cavities that rock had been cut from them before, to fill the strange

looking barrows over which Lon nearly stumbled as his gang, panicky with the thought of vengeance for lost time, pushed him forward.

But over the whole surface of the rock, wavering as if blown by some impalpable breeze, played a soft, lambent flame which yet gave no heat—a sort of ghostly cousin to the green glow of phosphorescence.

A Chinese, desperate at his foreman's inactivity, pushed past and took hold of one handle of a barrow. Another crowded to his side, dragging Lon, as the chain tightened, to the centre of the rock chamber. Together, groaning, the Orientals wheeled the thing up to the far wall. Wondering at the effort they had exerted and at the struggle two more men, immediately behind, were having with the second truck, Lon stopped, as the first two Chinese, snatching picks, attacked the glowing wall. Lon touched the side of the barrow. It was closed in by a lid which, with difficulty, he lifted. It was big enough to contain a vast quantity of ore. And lid, sides, and bottom, the container was made of lead!

Now the other barrow was in position, and the whole of his gang, save himself, was desperately at work. As Roberts appeared in the doorway of the cavern, accompanied by a threatening yell from Jake Blow, Lon took an implement and prepared to strike at the wall. For a moment he paused, astounded by the look of dismay which showed like a mask of sudden death on Roberts' green-illumined face.

"You know what it is?" he questioned hoarsely.

"My God, Lon——" Roberts began, and then the voice of Blow interrupted them again.

"Don't talk!" it yelled, as if from a mighty distance. "This here gallery I'm in's just like a megaphone—you hear me? You whisper even, an' I'll hear you above all the noise of the picks, an' I'll whip you bleedin' when you come out. Muck in, you swine, or you'll be sorry for it!"

The diminished sound of the overseer's voice testified to the truth of his statement, and without another word, Lon turned back to his work. Already the Chinese were feverishly shoveling up the little ore they had detached from the wall. Apparently the matrix was hard; harder than quartz, judging by the poor headway they had made. Gathering his muscles Lanky crushed his pick against the rock-face. Instinctively, as he felt the steel meet an almost steel-like surface, he closed his eyes to guard against flying splinters. Then, instantly he remembered the gibe of the idiot, as they crawled into their pitchy hovel the night before.

"When you've been in the Green Chamber," he had sniggered, "you'll crawl anywhere where you think it'll be dark, and you'll never find any darkness anywhere!"

With a chill of fear Lon realized what he had meant. As the pick struck, he had blinked his eyes. He had felt the lids go together;

yet there had been no momentary blotting out of the green light which played around him. His heart thudding, he paused and deliberately closed his eyes. He raised one hand to the lids and felt the line of the eyelashes—tight closed. And indeed he could no longer see the conformation of the rock-face; only that green light, flickering and wavering as it flickered on the rock-wall, but now inside his own eyes!

He turned and glanced at Roberts. The young man was standing, an arm across his brow, shaking his head as if to drive away the maddening internal luminance. Then, wild and staring, his eyes met Lon's.

"You ain't workin'!" yelled Jake Blow, in that far-distant voice. "Think I can't tell your strokes from them sick coolies? By God, if you don't start in, I'll——"

He roared on obscenely, until Lon, turning again, resumed his attack on the adamantine surface before him. How long he struck with all his strength, sending down only chip after chip, where in normal rock he would have dislodged pound after pound, he did not know. At the other side of the chamber Roberts was working with a similar desperation. Lon's head ached blindingly; his eyes, from the continual glow, unrelieved for a single instant, were burning as, he thought, the coolies' eyes must have burned before they reached the awful condition he had seen when they paraded that morning.

"Time!" howled Jake, at the conclusion of

an interminable interval. "Are those barrows full?"

The coolies, dropping their picks, grasped spades, and hurled themselves frenziedly at the pile of rock at Lon's feet. Roberts' two barrows were full already. The pile of chips Lon had flung down filled his gang's allotment until the leaden lid would not close on the contents of one truck.

Blow, stepping forward to meet the ghastly procession as it approached the spot where he had waited, added another touch to the picture of dread which was beginning to form in Lon's mind. The overseer advanced, blustering and cursing, to take back the whip he had lent to the desert man; suddenly he saw, in the ray of the flashlamp, that the lid of the barrow gaped. An instant later, the hairy ruffian was crouching back in the niche he had quitted, fumbling for a revolver with which to enforce the orders he shouted in a voice of abject fear.

"Get that lid down," Blow bellowed whiningly. "Curse you, you'd kill me? Git it down, or——"

The coolies, throwing their united weight on the lid, forced it home. A catch snapped, the line of luminosity which had showed in the opening disappeared, and the overseer, sniggering between oaths of relief, came out of his refuge, his whip held menacingly before him. Lon's eyes rested on the hulking coward contemptuously.

"Very conscientious, ain't you?" sneered

Blow, with a nervous giggle to indicate his perfect calm. "But it'll wear off. Like the nice white light?"

He flashed the ray of his torch into Lon's face and roared when, stricken through the eyes by an inexplicable agony like the thrust of a red-hot needle, the big man shrank back.

"You'll get over that, too," he laughed. "Pretty soon only the sun'll make you flinch like that, an' then it won't be long before you don't flinch from anythin'. The guy that had this gang afore, he lasted six weeks. Maybe you'll last longer. Let's hope so. Get on, now!"

The laden barrows, each handle now manned by two men, who had to be relieved every ten yards or so, crushed forward over the powdered floor. The chain that joined the laborers made the task of wheeling appalling. Twice Lon stumbled and fell; once the barrow nearly overturned as a result, and Blow, in a frenzy of fear, lashed the coolies murderously with the whip. He did not touch the white man, and it was as well. The long, loose muscles were ready tensed for a leap which should have made nothing of the chain and the human burden dragging on it; and for a hold which nothing should have loosed. With the remnants of his own clear-headed coolness Lon was for playing out the game to the very end, but since he had worked in the Green Chamber there was a terrible indecision in his mind. He had boasted to Roberts that

he had been in tighter places than this before, and had emerged. It had been a true bill at the time, but the Green Chamber had altered the case. With that green lambency dancing before his eyes, with a feeling in his heart that whatever it was it meant horrible death, Lon was half converted to desperation. After all, it might—it might be better to die quickly, before——

A few minutes later, suffering agonies with his eyes, he was following Blow across the sandy flats toward the main stone building of the village—a frightful journey. It was midday, the sun's heat was appalling; the barrow, in spite of the broad tread of its wheel, an almost impossible burden on the shifting alkali of the canyon floor.

Half-way across the distance, his brain reeling with the heat, Lon gasped for water. His greasewood plugs he had skilfully transferred from his discarded suit to his overalls, but he would not use them except in the last emergency. He prayed Roberts had made a similar transfer.

Jake received the request with a grin.

"Oh, you'll get water," he said. "Plenty of it—today, because you've brought such a nice load. That is, when you reach the laboratory yonder. Mush up, if you're thirsty!"

It seemed a dream, a nightmare, the rest of the way, but finally, first of all the gangs—thanks to the fresh strength of Lon and Roberts—the toiling column reached the stone building and shot the loads of ore into the

maw of a small crusher which stood close into the back of the house. Looking in through a rear window as Roberts' gang unloaded their barrows, Lon saw a long room containing rough benches, surmounted by racks of chemicals, and crossed at one end by a long line of glass boxes which he recognized as electric batteries. That was how the crusher worked, then. Primary batteries. Perhaps they got the chemicals for them out of the rock. There was native potassium bichromate, he knew; there was copperas; probably there was sulphur, for the preparation of sulphuric acid. The zinc——

Suddenly, amid a cluster of demijohns at the end of the room, he discerned the white whiskers of the arch-devil of this man-made desert hell. He turned away his head instantly, but old Crewe had seen him. And a moment later, the benevolent voice addressed him from an opened window.

"Good day!" it said cheerfully. And then to the scowling Jake: "Mr. Blow, I should like to speak with your two proteges a moment. If you will kindly unlock their restrainers. Thank you!"

Blow followed the two men at a distance of half a yard until they entered the room in which Crewe had interviewed them before. The old man was sitting at the same flat-topped stone desk, beaming more effulgently than before.

"You may leave us," he told Blow genially, "and you may also leave your revolver. Mine

is upstairs, and I am shy in the presence of strangers. Thank you."

The overseer, leering at his prisoners, left, and closed the door behind him. The old man came straight to the point.

"I fancied," he said silkily to Lon, "that your face contained a certain recognition of me. Some memory of a past incarnation, perhaps, when you saw me in my laboratory. Am I right?"

The tall man hesitated. Denial seemed more ticklish than admission. He plunged.

"I remember you," he said slowly, "lecturing at the University of California once."

"So gratifying," murmured the old man, toying with the trigger guard of the revolver. "Do you remember what I lectured on?"

Lon shook his head. The old man, however, seemed to be paying no attention to him. The beady black eyes were fixed on Roberts' face, averted to avoid the fierce light which streamed in at one of the windows.

"Then you will not understand your present surroundings," said Professor Crewe absently. Then with a threatening sharpness, "Perhaps your friend is better informed. Perhaps the name of Professor Jonas Crewe means something to *him?*"

Lon's heart stood still for just a second; then he saw Roberts look up with an expression of perfect blankness.

"No," said the young man hesitatingly. "No. God, my eyes hurt!"

"We were promised a drink of water," Lon followed up—heavily.

"All in good time," smiled the professor. "Then the Green Chamber is quite a mystery to both of you. Yet it seems to me that the young man should have some inkling of its meaning. If I am not mistaken, he is the same young man my son had to shoot some weeks ago, when with mistaken zeal he was trailing my son's fiancée? His name is Roberts?"

"Well?" asked Paul dully.

"I had the honor of knowing your father," said Professor Crewe benignantly. "Surely he must have mentioned my name to you?"

Roberts shook his head.

"I had thought," went on the old gentleman, picking up the revolver and balancing it carefully, "when I learned of your relationship to him—after your rash attempt to aid my niece in her attempt to escape from her only friends—that your father might have sent you to this district to pay me a visit."

"He sent me here for some purpose he never explained," said Roberts sulkily. "Just told me to come here, and died before he could tell me what to do next. I wish he'd never sent me."

"Considering the paucity of the instructions, I cannot blame you," said the benevolent professor, staring at him narrowly. "Surely he must have said more than that?"

"Not a cursed word," Roberts answered, burying his face in his hands. "I'm thirsty."

With a sigh which Lon interpreted as one of relief, Crewe arose and placed before them a red-clay olla and two cups of the same material. Reaching up to a gong that hung above his seat, he struck it with his knuckles, and a brazen note reverberated through the house.

A moment later, Joyce, her face stained by tears, entered the room from the inner door, while Blow, scowling as he saw the girl, stepped in from outside.

The venerable fiend at the desk looked smilingly from one to the other.

"Ah—I was not particularly calling you, Joyce, my dear," he said. "I have conveyed my views to you before, I think. But now you are here, pray stay; I was just going to tell these young gentlemen, and Mr. Blow too, what I told you earlier in the day—that our enterprise in this canyon is of a peculiar nature, and must be carried on by rather unconventional methods. Purely a matter of the richness of the ore—but that would not interest you. The richness of the ore has a regrettable effect on the lives of our workers. It also brings to our midst persons whom we do not welcome, save as recruits to our gangs. Therefore our circumstances force us to get as much labor as we can out of our assistants while they last. If unwelcome visitors are inconvenienced, perhaps they will warn other visitors away—by telepathy. Well, Mr. Blow and the other overseers, gentlemen—and Joyce, my dear—are entrusted with the

task of getting the labor out of the laborers. They know their work, and really they must not be interfered with. No. And if even my relatives attempt to do so, they will be punished. As this young lady has been punished today—I having seen this morning's incident from my window—by deprivation of water for twenty-four hours or so. This both reproves the offender, and takes a strain off our expensive artesian well. A second offense would mean forty-eight hours of drought, and so on. So that you, my dear friends, will not respectively attempt, encourage, or permit, such action by this young lady in future."

His little eyes like those of a basilisk, Crewe looked at the trembling girl at his side, then rose, and in courtly fashion opened the door for her. With one helpless backward glance at Roberts, whose eyes belied the dullness he had shown while being questioned, she went out.

"Gentlemen," said Crewe, smiling under those terrible small eyes of his, "I wish you good evening."

Herded into their beehive again, after a hasty examination of Billy Hawkins, whom they found lying, conscious but very weak, close to the door, they sat in tense silence until the footsteps of the overseer, retreating after the placing of the snake-barrier, had died into silence, and then Lon hurled out his question:

"What is it?"

Roberts looked at him in the dim light for

an instant, apparently at a loss for words to express the mystery.

"I couldn't believe it at first," he said. "It's unheard of—impossible, except in this freak of a country. What we brought in in those barrows today would pay off the national debt of the United States. We've worked all day in the middle of more wealth than there is in the world. All the gold in the world couldn't buy the stuff that's going to kill us if we don't get away from it!"

"Gee!" said Billy Hawkins faintly.

Lon laid a firm hand on Roberts' arm. The quiet force of the man steadied the boy's nerves.

"Just tell me what it is," he said quietly.

"You've heard of pitchblende?" came back a voice as quiet as his own. "Well, some freak of nature's packed the contents of about fifty million tons of pitchblende into a few tons of that rock we've been working in today. I knew it as soon as the liquids of my own eyeballs became luminous, so that the glow still shone when I blinked. It's radium!"

In the dead silence that followed, Lon licked his dry lips.

"Radium, eh?" he queried casually.

"That's what killed the Chinese we found," said Roberts. "It's half refined in the native rock. That man must have stolen some that Crewe had refined to the final concentration. He carried it in the breast of his blouse. You saw what it did to him!"

"What did it do?" asked Billy Hawkins cheerfully.

He received no answer. The two men who had been in the Green Chamber were beyond cheering.

"Two days exposure to that rock," said Roberts, "would start that process of decomposition at work on us. Once started, it can never be stopped. The men we have seen today are doomed. Tomorrow we shall have our death sentence! First, slowly, we shall go blind; then we shall be paralyzed; and then——"

He did not finish; the dead Chinese spoke of the last stage.

"Then we got to get out quick," said Lon, the old vibrance gone from his tone, and its lack belying the words he spoke.

The two men, their mood repressing even the cheerfulness of the wounded man by the door, sat on, as if numbed, in silence. A fetid mess of rice and meat, thrust in among them by means of a long pole at which the snakes across the threshold struck viciously, remained untouched.

In the evening they spoke hopelessly of plans for escape. They might fall upon Blow, strangle him—but how could they pass the guard at the head of the canyon, chained as they were to the coolies? Without aid from outside, it was impossible to escape after they had been locked in their hut. A man crushing through the eighteen inches above the deadly box in the doorway could not escape

being bitten by the hungry snakes they could hear hissing as they spoke.

As the sky grew dark, Lon and Roberts lay still, envying Billy Hawkins the torpor into which he fell so easily. They themselves could not sleep. In addition to the thoughts of inevitable doom which filled the brain of each—their eyes, clear enough in the sunlight, filled, as the darkness fell, with the green internal glow which was to destroy them.

So they lay until about midnight, they judged, when without warning a soft, clear voice with a desperate thrill in it whispered from close outside the doorway, "Roberts! Mr. Roberts!"

It was Joyce.

VI

ALL evening long Lon's abstracted eyes, staring out of the creep-hole, had seen the sand of the canyon floor agitated by little whirls as of wind, though there was no wind in the canyon itself, and the moon, when it showed for an instant in the angry-looking sky, had been encircled by a ring of pale salmon. Now the night was pitchy dark. The wulliwaws of wind and the aspect of the moon had meant a sandstorm, which, so far, had not struck the surface of the desert. In the upper air there was inferno of battling winds. A southerly gale, bearing tons of sand from the northward stretches of desert, had encountered some blast deflected upward by the rocky walls of the barranca. Thousands of feet above the torrid stagnation of the canyon, vast columns and eddies of white dust were whirling through the darkness, absorbing the moon's pale light into their chaos, and covering at least one section of the earth with a blanket of utter black. Absorbed in meditations which, in spite of himself, dealt only with the hopeless features of the situation before him, Lon had thought little of the phenomenon. After that whisper from outside, it took another position in his thoughts. A

moment before, it seemed that sandstorms, earthquakes, the very dissolution of mountains, could be no more to him than butterflies fluttering before a man on his way to be hanged. Story-books to the contrary notwithstanding, no man can fight on when there is literally no hope; the test of the brave man is the intensity of his reaction to the slightest gleam of opportunity. The presence of Joyce —a girl, unarmed, and not entrusted with the secrets of the canyon—could, it seemed, be of very little help, yet at her first word Lon had snapped out of his state of depression, back into his old, deliberate character—a man ready for anything.

"Yes?" he questioned softly, at the same instant as Roberts. With the ingrained instinct of the desert man, Billy Hawkins had sensed the emergency even in his unnatural sleep, and now turned, groaning a little, to his side. Roberts crawled a little nearer to the doorway, and from the wooden box the rattlers hissed menacingly.

"You've disturbed the snakes," said the girl with something like a sob. "We must wait until they're quiet again. Then I can unlock the catch, and drag the box away. I can't find the cover, and——"

"Going to let us out?" asked Lon quietly.

"I was going to wait," came the trembling voice from outside, "until I could get you guns and a better chance to—— But I've had to do it now. My uncle fears that your coming to the canyon may mean the coming of

others. This afternoon he sent Blow to Pueblo Indio for a notary that's hand in glove with him, and tonight he is going to marry me to my cousin. For God's sake, if you are men, protect me!"

A low growl of fury came from Roberts. Lon laid a quiet hand on his arm.

"All right, miss," he said; "I guess we'll attend to that." He listened an instant. The snakes were still writhing and striking at the walls of their prison. "What's his idea, doin' that?"

"What does it matter?" cried the girl. "He's guardian of the money my father left me—my uncle is. Tomorrow I shall be twenty-one, and mistress of it. He thinks if he can get the money under his control he will be able to bribe off any officers that may come here. He has not dared to put any of this radium on the market—yet—he fears it might arouse inquiry. He threatened this once before, and I escaped—when Mr. Roberts saw me. But while that fight was going on in Pueblo Indio, my cousin caught up with me and dragged me back. Tonight my uncle has locked me in my room; my cousin's standing before the door. I got out of the window by a lariat——"

"Can't you escape—yourself?" Roberts growled passionately. "Can't you get a horse and——"

"The horses are locked in a stable, and Blow has the only key to it," the girl answered shakenly. "If I let you out, you can perhaps

get it from him. There are four horses. I tried to get your weapons, but——"

"We ain't quite barehanded, miss," said Lanky Lon very quietly.

A hoarse chuckle from his side made him start.

"Not quite," said Billy Hawkins, struggling to rise, and pulling, it seemed by the sound of his fingers on leather, at one of his boots. "I took that tip you give me one time, Lon. There's a little flat automatic under one of my insteps, an' a little ol' knife in the other. Put 'em there before I started this trip." He grunted as the riding boot came off, and there was a dull clink of steel. "Anything you may say will be used in evidence against you," added Billy, half deliriously, "and don't you forget to recollect to remember it, ol' Flower of the Prairie."

"The snakes have stopped striking," came the tense whisper from outside, "and I can——"

But the sentence was never finished. A howl of insane glee broke in upon it. There was a brief struggle, a stifled cry in the girl's voice, a shout, and a struggle inside the beehive as Lon held Roberts from throwing his life away by trying to crawl through the deadly opening to Joyce's assistance. Then they heard Ronald Crewe's horribly empty voice, mocking his captive.

"Thought you could escape me, cousin, did you?" he laughed. "Thought your friends here could steal you away from Ronald, eh?

I'm a dull fellow, but I remember when there's a back way from a room. I wasn't sitting on the stairs as you thought, you little fool! I found your rope hanging two minutes after you'd gone. Ah—fight me, will you?"

There was another sound of struggle, ending with the thud of a heavy blow. Roberts, in Lon's vise-like grip, made a frightful effort to hurl himself forward, then, dropping his head on his hands, gave an agonized moan. Lon bent close to him and whispered. His words of comfort were drowned by the bellow of the brute outside. He had heard that sound of despair and was enraged by it as some beasts of prey are enraged by the sight of the helplessness of their victims.

"Wait—wait—wait," he chattered at the men in the huts. "Spies, informers, the three of you. I will come back tonight. I will come back tonight and burn you with hot iron bars. I'll torture you until it'll take Blow half an hour to whip you to your work. They're waiting for me in the big house now, and I must go, but I'll come back. I'll have the iron bars heating while I'm married, you swine. Wait for me. Don't go away!"

He yelled with laughter again, swore at them horribly, and turned away, still laughing. Lon, big drops of cold sweat beading above his eyes, heard the uneven footsteps of the man, as he swayed along with the burden of the unconscious girl in his arms, receding over the sand.

"If it had only been five seconds later," said Roberts, in the flat, dead voice of a man half stupefied, "we could have crawled out and killed him so easily—so easily!"

"And now," said Lon in a tone of ice, "we've got to figure out some way of getting out and doing it anyway. We can't get at them snakes to kill them; the box is too wide to be covered up by any of our clothing or anything, and we can't move it. Yet it's got to be covered. We can't shoot the snakes through the box, because they would hear the shots, and that would be the end of us. Yet we can't let that girl——"

"Shut up!" snarled Roberts. An instant later, in his normal tone, he said, "There's only one thing to do, and that's cover the box. Guess that's true, isn't it?"

"Yes, but——" began Lon.

"Can two of you manage that gang?" asked Roberts quietly. "Listen. When you're out of here, you can go and let the white men we saw this morning out of their huts. I guess *they'll* help you. That'll make it certain."

Lon heard him move in the darkness.

"If I might be allowed to hazard a remark——" began Billy Hawkins.

"Listen to me, you fool," snapped Lanky Lon, his hands again on Roberts. "If you go an' lie across that box, what good'll it do us? You'll fill up the opening above the box. They've fixed that."

Now Roberts fought with his detainer as if with a mortal enemy.

"Let me go," he gasped. "I'll reach in and kill 'em with my hands, I tell you. Let me go. In ten minutes—five minutes—it'll be too late. Let me go!"

Lanky Lon had thrown the desperate man on his back, and was holding him down with the last atom of his great strength when Billy Hawkins struck a match. The flickering yellow light, striking into the green glow in the eyes of the struggling men, was agony enough to startle Lon into loosing his grip. Instantly Roberts hurled the big man off his chest. It was at this moment that Billy Hawkins' next words struck in on his suicidal resolve.

"Young man," said the holder of the match —like Lanky Lon, he was a bare two years older than Roberts, though his hard-bitten face gave him a strange look of seniority—"attend to me. Keep your head, and remember that before I took to my present way of livin' I was a policeman in the Los Angeles zoo. Also, I've got a red neckcloth. An' if you've got a piece of string, we shall all live to a ripe old age—perhaps. Have you?"

Roberts stared at the bloodstained scarecrow with the bandage around his head, thinking that the blow on the skull had unhinged his brain. But the set of Billy Hawkins' thin lips showed that if he was mad, there was grim, purposeful method in him.

"You got a bootlace," said Lanky Lon.

Billy dropped the match as it burned his fingers, and the steel tags of the laces clicked as he dragged them through the eyelets.

"So I have," he said, in an interval of silence which followed. "Say, Lon, strike another match."

"I wish," he added, as the new light sputtered up, "that I knew how many of the sarpents there are. I guess at two. How many do you bet on, boys?"

Lon and Roberts looked at him as he crawled closer to the curved back of the box in the doorway, dragging after him the bootlace, to one end of which he had fastened a strip of scarlet calico.

"Shove the light a bit closer," he asked weakly. "Hurry! I ain't feelin' so well."

Lon held the match by the doorway. Hastily, as if he feared his ebbing strength would not permit him to be careful, Billy Hawkins rapped on the box with his knuckles. As a rattle and hiss from within answered him, he threw the red calico forward. Scarcely had it flown over the box, than a wicked flat head, its scales glittering, flashed up at it. In the same instant, Billy jerked the attached string sharply back.

"If there's one thing they hate more than humanity, then fellers," he said, very faintly, "it's red cloth. Strike another match, Lon. I—got this trick—from a Hindu snake-charmer. When—snakes see red calico, they strike it. An' so, when there's a string tied to the calico aforesaid, we pull their fangs off—" he held the bit of neckcloth under the match, to show the two inch-long needles of bone which were embedded in it—"like this!"

There was no time for wonder or congratulation. Immediately, he again threw in the bait for his terrible fish—and again, and again. Twice more the rag came back bearing the deadly spines, and then, though the snakes struck furiously, it was without effect.

"Got 'em!" said Billy Hawkins cheerfully. And keeled over on the floor in a dead faint.

Lon threw down the match.

"Get him conscious," he snapped to Roberts. "I'm going out."

The scrape of his rough clothes over the hollow box showed that he had started immediately.

"Where to?" asked Roberts protestingly. "There's no time——"

"Ssssh!" said Lon. "Hurry him up. I'm going for the other white men—Harry Manley and the rest. Back soon."

He was gone. Roberts, his hands trembling with impatience, raised Billy Hawkins' head. There was no water, no air worth mentioning, nothing to do for the unconscious man but take his wounded head off the hard earthen floor. But Billy had been raised in a hard school where a man's nurse must generally be his own constitution, and already he was reviving. As Lon's stealthy footsteps arrived again at the doorway, in fact, he wrenched himself out of the supporting arms, and sat up.

"Get those things out of the corner there, Paul," came Lon's deliberate voice. "The things I buried. And be particularly care-

ful of that little white packet. It's half a stick of dynamite. Got them?"

Roberts scratched where the earth was softer, and recovered the badge, the small revolver, Lon's knife, and the packet.

"Come on," whispered the man at the door.

They crawled out over the harmless reptiles. The moon was still hidden, but some thinning of the sandstorm above had let through the ghost of a radiance, which enabled them dimly to make out each other's forms.

"Give me the badge," said Lanky Lon. "In the name of the United States, I command you to assist me in the arrest of certain prisoners. Take this knife and come on."

"Where's——?" began Roberts.

"Never mind them," said Lon, in a peculiar, deep voice. "They're — they're coming. There's the lights of the house. We'll cut straight toward 'em. If you hear any footsteps, stand dead still. If we meet anyone, you, Roberts, kill him with that knife. Don't miss. One mistake now, and we're all dead men."

He stepped forward, with the silent, easy-jointed tread of the born trailer. Roberts followed him at a distance of a yard, and behind them, like a spectre in his noiselessness, came Billy Hawkins, the little automatic in one hand, the thin-bladed knife with the flat hilt in the other.

"He got my badge, curse him," said Billy

when, three yards from the looming mass of the stone house, and almost within the radius of the glow from the lighted windows of Crewe's study, they stopped, side by side. Lon pressed the precious trifle into his hand.

"I'm going forward," he whispered into Hawkins' ear. "When I smash the window, you go in by the door." He turned to Roberts. "You stay here," he said, "and when Manley and the rest come, bring them in. They can't see in the light. Ready?"

He crept forward. His head appeared suddenly, silhouetted in black against the dull yellow of the lighted blind.

"But when you say 'No,' my dear," he heard the soft voice of Professor Crewe enunciate kindly, "perhaps you do not know exactly what that means. I will explain."

Inside the room, under the glare of the hanging lamp, the old man was standing very close to Joyce. The girl, half fainting, but with her lips compressed and her eyes steady, was being held to her feet by the great arm of Ronald flung around her waist. To Ronald's right, as if ready to serve as best man at this mockery of a wedding, stood Blow, his heavy features set into a grin, half of pleasantness befitting the occasion, half of delight at the position of the girl who had lashed him with his own whip. The other two overseers stood, one against the inner door of the room, one against the outer, hands on hips, thumbs on their belts. In front of Ronald and the girl, at the side of the professor, stood a tall,

saturnine man on whose thin face was stamped an expression of cold, relentless cruelty. Yet he was nervous, and as he stood there, he glanced continually about him. Perhaps he was thinking of the blind wraiths of strong men which thronged that valley of horror. If Crewe and his son, who lived there and had made those men what they were, felt uneasy enough to post guards at each door when their victims in the huts lay penned in by their frightful barriers, the mere outside man, the procurer of supplies and information, might well tremble. Besides, a blast of icy air, a slant from the gales above, had just struck down the sweltering canyon. The windows of the house rattled, and even old Crewe looked behind him. Instantly, however, he turned again to the girl.

"Don't imagine," he said with the utmost urbanity, "that I am not aware of the imagined condition of your heart. Yes, yes. I have been young. Even before tonight I had diagnosed a certain—well, a passing fancy, for this promising young Mr. Roberts, who, as you say, is the rightful owner of this pleasant and eligible property. You would deny this tenderness, my dear, but you cannot deceive me. Now let it persuade you to fulfil my wishes, and say 'Yes' when Mr. Thorndike asks you again if you take Ronald for your husband and so on. Because otherwise, I shall have to cut young Mr. Roberts' promise short, I fear. He begins to annoy me, my dear."

Thorndike shuddered. Joyce's breathing became short and difficult. For a second she paused, looking from one relentless face to another, and then faintly she asked:

"And if I consent——?"

The arch-villain stroked his beard.

"Why then, my dear——" he began.

"You will free him?"

Crewe shook his head slowly.

"If I told you I would," he said, gently reproving, "you would know that I would not fulfil the promise. And why? Simply to protect your interests, my dear. As my son's wife, this will be your property, too—much more valuable after your money has developed it further, and enabled me to work out my scheme for disposing of our product without flooding the market. If Roberts reappeared among living men—well, you see I am merely protecting your interests. After you have said 'Yes'——"

The girl tore herself, by a sudden motion, out of the grasp of the grinning son.

"No!" she cried. "Never! Do what you like to me. No!"

The old man considered her unwinkingly for five seconds. And when he spoke to Blow, his black beads of eyes did not move from her face. Nor did the benevolent smile leave his face.

"Blow," he said gently, "light the brazier. Mr. Burton, leave the inner door unguarded a few minutes, and see if you can induce Mr. Roberts to come here."

The girl shrank as Blow pushed past her into the inner room. He reappeared in a moment, dragging a small iron grate filled with charcoal.

"There is an iron bar in there," said Crewe pleasantly, "on the floor, Blow. Bring that too. And the pincers."

Burton was passing Joyce on his way to the outer door, whose sentinel had moved aside to let him pass. At these last words of the smiling devil before her, she grasped the overseer's arm and pushed him back.

"Wait!" she cried breathlessly. "Wait!"

Words failed her; she stood panting, her hands clenched.

"Well?" asked Crewe. "Well?"

"I—I——" began the girl. Her eyes were wide and wild, her lips now half open. Evidently she was holding herself, by a superhuman effort of will, back from the borders of hysteria.

"Far be it from me to be unreasonable," said Crewe, watching her, and striving to keep his victim conscious enough for his purposes. "Your consent is only a formality; we could proceed without it. But there may come to this valley official persons who would not take our view of this matter. They might say—regardless of your reputation, my dear—that if you had not consented the marriage was illegal. I should suffer by that, too, but I am considering you, my child. Perhaps you have seen this. Perhaps you are going to consent."

Repeatedly, as if she scarcely knew what she was doing, the girl nodded.

"On one condition," she said almost inaudibly.

Crewe considered her again.

"What is it?" he asked.

For a moment there was no answer; the male actors in the grim scene fidgeted and lowered at each other as the girl, struggling to compose herself enough for speech, stared at her uncle in the dancing lamp-light.

"Since—you won't—release the men," she said faintly "—if I consent—will you kill them?"

There was a dead silence; all the men stared at the slender woman who made this terrible request.

"Shoot them," she went on. "Tomorrow, before the Green Chamber makes him—them—horrible. Will you?"

There was another dead silence. Thorndike shuddered and turned away.

"And if I say yes?" asked Crewe. "It will be very inconvenient, for we are short-handed now, but I will make any concession to please you, my dear. If I promise? Say if I even swear it?"

"Then," said the girl, clasping her hands, "I—will—consent."

There was a crash of glass. With a flapping rattle, the yellow blind of the window nearest to Crewe flew up on its roller. At the same instant the heavy door crashed back, sending a wind which made the lamp swing,

flare, and smoke. Before the armed men in the room could move their hands to their belts, they saw, trained it seemed on all of them simultaneously, the revolver of Lanky Lon at the window. And at the door, knife and automatic ready, bandage pushed back from his brow to give him clearer vision, stood Billy Hawkins.

"It's very kind of you, miss," said Lanky, "to offer such a sacrifice." The whole window frame splintered as he heaved his long body into the room.

"But I don't think," he added slowly, "that it'll be necessary."

VII

PUT your guns on the floor," said Lon to the overseers, without taking his eyes off old Crewe. Scarcely had the words left his lips than a bullet from the tiny revolver he held thudded through the boards at Blow's feet. "Jump to it! There's no funny business about this, gentlemen. When I give orders in my official capacity, I need instantaneous action."

The six heavy pistols clattered down.

"Keep peeled, Billy," said Lon, gathering them up. One, after examining its cartridges, he held, slipping the girl's revolver into the pocket of his blue overalls. Another he handed to Hawkins, who hefted its satisfying bulk with a sigh of contentment. The remaining four, with a quick motion of his heel, Lon scraped behind him, for future reference.

Up to the conclusion of these swift movements, none of the ruffians they had surprised had spoken a word. Now Crewe broke in.

"You have mentioned your official capacity," he said, with a politeness which no longer veiled his real emotions. His rubicund face was pale with a morbid pallor, and his thick lips showed a tinge of purple over

their redness. His voice was thick. "What is it?"

"Well, I figured you knew that," said Lon. "I'm a Government officer. Mr. Hawkins here is another. And the young gentleman outside—Roberts—is still another, in addition to being sheriff of this part of the world."

"Doubtless," said Crewe, his lips scarcely moving, "you have warrant for what you do?"

"Ain't necessary," said Lon, "but I have—yes. A warrant for John Doe, the name being fictitious, his real surname being unknown at the time the warrant was issued. But it's you, all right."

The old man said nothing. His small black eyes dropped to the floor; he appeared to be meditating, his short, thick fingers moving restlessly.

"I think I'll just——" Lon began, taking a step toward him. He had no doubt that somewhere on his person the venerable devil had some weapon of offense, or some means of self-destruction. But just as he reached his side, a snarl from behind him fixed his attention.

"Stand away, you!" cried Billy Hawkins. "Unless you want lead through you. You!"

He was speaking to Ronald who, while the invaders had been answering the questions of his father, had stepped closer to Joyce. Hawkins' menacing tone stopped the dull giant in his tracks. For a moment he stood with his back to the two officers, his face toward Joyce, and then slowly, taking several steps to ac-

complish the movement, he turned around. Lon felt the survivals of hair-roots along his spine bristle as he caught a full view of the man's face. Formerly he had been simply a specimen of low-grade mentality; now, thanks to the shock of that night, he had burst suddenly into acute mania. His flat, low-browed face with its jutting, unshaven jaw, had always been repulsive. Now, with the ape-like eyes blazing with madness, it was a sight to chill the stoutest heart. And in a low, thunderous voice the lunatic was muttering.

"What are you standing there for?" he mumbled. "What are you waiting for, Father? They've got us; it's the rope if they take us alive. There's only three of them to six of us. We shall die anyhow, and if we spring on them now, we'll take them with us."

"Stand back!" shouted Lon. The heavy revolver he had picked up crashed in the confined space. "Come another step, and I'll shoot to kill!"

Shufflingly, Ronald moved on toward him. His red-rimmed eyes had not blinked at the roar of the shot. He had ignored it entirely.

"Father," he muttered, "you're armed. "You overseers, follow me. I'm going to kill —to kill!"

Lon's finger tightened on the trigger. Now, he knew instinctively, was the time to fire, but some sign of the dregs of humanity in the bestial eyes two yards from him made him pause. Not in cold blood. He glanced at Billy Hawkins, who, crouching from the

waist, was covering the overseers. The faces of these men had changed while the idiot spoke. Insane as he was, his words rang true in their ears. Before the law there was no mercy for any of the crew of that canyon; they knew it. Their muscles had tightened; their eyes narrowed.

In one instant there was a sharp movement on the part of the old man at Lon's elbow. As the big man turned to guard himself, with a roar that shook the very air, Ronald leaped for his throat. Billy Hawkins fired twice—thrice—again. Lon felt the great body locked to his give a convulsive shiver; then its grip tightened about his arms, and its enormous weight bore him backward. As he fell, his senses sharpened by the imminence of death, he saw Blow snatch up the iron brazier and hurl it, scattering charcoal, at Billy Hawkins; caught the glitter of some weapon in the hand of old Crewe, and saw the flash of blue denim as Roberts, alarmed by the shots, rushed in at the door. Then as the huge hairy paws of Ronald closed about his throat, every cell of Lon's brain concentrated on the direction of his muscular forces. His hands closed on the wrists of the lunatic; with the exertion of all his strength, twisting them inward, he fought to break the crushing grip.

"I've got you," snarled the lips above him—there was a tiny fleck of foam in each corner of the loose, grinning mouth. "I've got you. Die! Die!"

One wrist was giving. With a sudden roll,

Lon dislodged it entirely, and twisted his neck, regardless of almost unendurable agony in the muscles under the ear, out of the grasp of the other. Then his own hands shot up, forcing the horrible face away from him. Ronald's arms flailed stunning blows on his face. He disregarded them as if they had been the smacks of a petulant child. Out of the tail of his eye, he could see old Crewe, revolver in hand, drawing back out of the mêlée which now covered the whole floor, striving to get a careful shot under his son's body. That must be prevented——

Suddenly he loosed his grip of Ronald's chin, grasped his assailant in his arms, and with a mighty effort rolled him over to where he would be a shield against his father's bullet. And, as if Providence had intervened, at that instant the old man fired. The struggling body under Lon's hands relaxed suddenly and lay still. From somewhere to his right he heard an agonized wail, rising high above the noise of battle which shook the room.

"Ronald! Ronald!"

"He ain't dead," muttered Lon to himself. Close against his ear he could hear the son's breathing—stertorous and slow as Billy Hawkins' had been, stunned by the graze of the bullet.

Suddenly, instantaneously, as if cut short with a knife, the racket of blows and curses stopped.

"Move again," said a level voice, "and I'll throw it on the ground."

Who was this, Lon asked himself, essaying feebly to struggle to his feet. Not Roberts, not Billy Hawkins. And throw *what* on the ground?

He saw. In the doorway, his sightless eyes averted, one hand upraised with the white paper package which Lon had entrusted to Roberts, and which Roberts had given into his charge that he might be freer in the use of his knife, stood Harry Manley, like a living corpse.

"You know what it is. Blow, you know; you too, Burton. You know that I'll throw it. Don't move any more."

"Manley!" gasped Lon.

"Yes," said the skeleton in the doorway, "that was my name when—I was alive. Don't move, any of you. Boys, come along in."

At this command, spoken in the same dead, disinterested voice that had struck into the fight and stopped the overseers just as the weight of their numbers was turning the tide in their favor, there trooped into the room the other white men who had headed the gangs at the parade of death's heads that morning. Under the lamp-light their appearance was more terrible than in the sun. The dim radiance, streaming down from overhead, flung into high relief the awful hollows of their cheeks, the empty pits under their eyes, the jutting boniness of their skull-like foreheads. There were six of them, counting Manley who, weakened to the point of ex-

haustion by even so much unaccustomed labor, was now leaning heavily against the doorpost.

"Sit down," said Manley, slipping weakly into that position himself.

Like a conference of the departed, the other men took their positions in a ghastly semi-circle; Lon glanced at the overseers, and suddenly understood their obedience to a death-threat which they had ignored only a few minutes before. Death was one thing. Death from the bony hands of these apparitions was another. The eyes of the three brutes who had lashed these ghosts so long were fixed in their heads as they looked at their prisoners, now in power over them. Thorndike, sitting in the corner where Billy Hawkins had hurled him during the fight, was weeping like a terrified child. Only old Crewe was exempt from the fear which was paralyzing the others. Kneeling at the other side of the room, he was peering into the still face of his son, muttering to him, imploring the senseless giant to speak to him.

"Lon," said Manley in the same flat tone, "are you here?"

The big man crossed to him.

"You're arresting them, ain't you?" asked Manley.

"Yes," said Lon.

"You can't take them back with you now," said the spokesman of the death's heads. "There's only four horses. One for you, one for the girl, and two for the other two men!"

"That's all right," said Lon softly, taking

the bony hand in his. "We'll ride into Pueblo Indio, and bring back other ponies for them —and for you. We'll have you all out of this, Harry, by tomorrow."

The almost fleshless face before him twisted into a grin. From behind him where the other five men sat came hoarse, raven-like chuckles.

"That's all right about us," said Manley evenly. "We ain't honing for the outside world no more. But you—you'd better get started, Lon. There's a sandstorm coming. I can feel it in the air. You better get going at once. You can leave the prisoners here. We'll guard them till you get back."

"Where are the horses, then?" asked Lon.

At these words, old Crewe flung up his head.

"Don't tell them!" he snarled, all the urbanity, all the veneer, gone from his tone. "Let 'em find them if they can!"

Blow, who had opened his lips, closed them again.

"Where are the horses?" asked the dead voice of Manley.

There was no answer. Clumsily, wearily, his hand on Lon's shoulder, the skeleton climbed to his feet.

"Rossiter—Kelway," he said, gasping from the exertion, "the brazier's on the floor. Pick it up!"

The semicircle chuckled. The two men addressed, crawling on their knees, their hands feeling before them, moved to obey the order.

"No!" screamed Blow suddenly. "I'll tell! I'll tell! They're in the next cavern after the Green Chamber—locked in. Burton had the key, the only key. I haven't got it, I swear."

"Give me the key," said Manley, holding out his hand.

Burton, holding his self-control by a mighty effort, made no move. With a rattle of metal, the brazier was raised to its standing position. Chuckling, the blind men on the floor groped for the scattered charcoal.

"Here's the iron bar!" cried one voice, creaking and rattling in the throat of the speaker. "Put in the charcoal, boys! Light it up—light it up!"

"Look here, Manley——" began Lon, his nerves shaken by the awful glee of the victims as they prepared their revenge.

"Be quiet," said the ghost at his side. "I'm helping you, Lon, because you've given us the chance we've all prayed for these long months —years, it may be. Interfere with me, and I'll blow all of us off the face of the earth. You're talking to a dead man. The dead can manage their own affairs!"

He raised the half stick of dynamite.

"Take hold of him," he said softly to his followers. "He stands three feet away from my voice."

"No!" screamed Burton, just as Blow had screamed a minute before. "No, no! Here's the key!"

He gave it into Manley's hand, and leaped

back again cowering, as far from the blind man as possible.

"There's the key," said Manley, handing it to Lon, and lowering himself again to the floor. "Get the horses and go! Burton'll show you the way to the cavern."

"Yes, yes," cried the overseer, white with terror.

"Roberts," said Lon slowly, "you go with him."

The young sheriff's gun at his back, Burton stumbled out of the room.

"The sandstorm will not come till tomorrow," said Manley, his sightless eyes turned to the boards on which he sat. "You can be back in Pueblo Indio by then. If you delay, you will be caught in it. You must go tonight. Hear me?"

"I——" began Lon.

The blind face turned toward him.

"What?" asked Manley.

"My prisoners——" began Lon. "I ought to——"

"You ought to take them with you," said Manley flatly. "But you can't. To take even one of them, you would have to leave someone behind. One of you is wounded, the other a girl. They must go at once, but they cannot cross the desert without your aid. You must go with them. We will guard the prisoners."

Thorndike in his corner gave a hysterical cry.

"No," said Lon.

"Yes," said Harry Manley.

Distantly, in the silence that followed, all in the room could hear the ring of the hoofs of the ponies as, led by Roberts and Burton, they approached.

Blow, with a harsh cry of supplication, dropped to his knees.

"Don't leave me with them!" he gasped. "For God's sake, don't leave me with them."

The semicircle of ghosts chuckled again.

"Seems strange to hear him use that tone, don't it, boys?" asked Manley, joining in the chuckle. "Silence, you!"

"I can't leave them," said Lon slowly.

"Lon," said Manley, "I ain't been telling you what you can do or can't do. I ain't got time to argue. This is what you must do. There's no way out of it. And if there was, by God, I'd close it! Listen to me. There's four horses; there's no way you can make it right to carry any others than you an' your party. They can't carry double, as you know. An' if they could—there's us in here, an' outside there's a ring of Chinamen all around this house. We want to keep watch over these friends of ours for one night. How many they've kept watch over us!"

The ponies were at the door.

"You'll torture them," whispered Lon.

Manley chuckled.

"No," he said.

"You'll kill them," said the big man. "I can't leave them with you."

"We'll not touch them," said Manley. "On

the honor of a dead man, not one of us will lay a finger on them."

Lon paused. As he did so, a heavy thud from behind him made him spin on his heel.

Roberts had just come in at the door to report the completion of his mission. On the threshold—he had staggered and fallen forward, weakened beyond endurance by a wound from which the blood welled, dyeing the blue of the right breast of his overall a threatening purple. Lon sprang forward to raise him, but quick as he was, Joyce, who since the beginning of the fight had crouched in a corner, was quicker. Sobbing and murmuring inarticulate words, she placed the wounded man's head on her lap, and looked up at Lon with agonized eyes. The detective glanced at Billy Hawkins, now sunk back into heavy slumber at the foot of one wall. There had been no chance of disobeying Manley's order before. And now——

"I'll have to take you at your word, Manley," he said sharply.

He knelt by Roberts' side. The wound, by its location, required immediate attention—more than could possibly be given it in that place. By forcing the pace, he could get Roberts to Pueblo Indio within six hours. The ponies at the door were fresh; there would be no need to conserve their strength for emergency, since a town was their goal. With the eye of the desert rat, Lon had noted the line of the canyon through which they had approached the radium valley. He believed

he could follow it back, by the light of the dawn which was already sending in pale gray beams through the shattered windows. Roughly he told Joyce to go away; then with a strip torn from the leg of Roberts' overall he bandaged the wound in the breast as well as might be. He worked in silence. At the other end of the room, watching their guards with eyes of fascinated horror, Thorndike, Blow, the other overseer, and old Crewe sat speechless.

Finally the bandaging was done. Lon rose.

"There's a man missing," said Manley. "Where's the overseer that went after the ponies? Bring him close to me. Let him sit at my right hand."

But Burton, rather than enter that room again, had turned when Roberts had crashed to the floor, and fled, blind with terror, into the open spaces of the canyon. There was no way of escape; he had no water, and eight hours later the sandstorm which swept down out of the blazing sky must have choked him and buried him.

"He's gone," said Lon.

The semicircle of ghosts chuckled.

"Well, these won't go," said Manley. "You can rely on that. They know I can hear 'em move, an' they know us guys don't care much for life. So they know, if they move, I'll throw this dynamite."

"They'll be here when I come back?" asked Lon, stooping to pick Roberts up in his arms. "Your honor, Manley!"

"Just where they sit now," said Manley softly. "They will not have moved."

Now, as Lon, waking Billy Hawkins, moved toward the door, old Crewe rose, and babbled please that he might be taken, that his age might save him, that these men whom he had condemned to an awful death would have compassion on him.

"Silence, you!" said Manley in a terrible voice. "You have heard me promise not to lay a finger on you. Silence!"

Joyce was outside, dazed with the horror of the night, and out of earshot of the moanings of the white-bearded scoundrel. Billy Hawkins, helping her feebly to her horse, began to speak loudly to cover the distressing sounds. Lon, glancing once more around that room, its macabre inhabitants rendered still more awful-looking by the watery mingling of the lamp-light with the reddening light of the sky, shuddered and stepped through the door.

Outside he paused again, half decided to go back, but the weight of Roberts in his arms checked the motion. There was nothing to be done but go forward—to hasten to Pueblo Indio. The law of the land commanded him not to desert his prisoners; the law of the desert ordained that he stand by his companions to the last. Roberts must have medical attention at once; his case was worse than Hawkins' had been when Lon, obeying the desert rule, had braved the unknown perils of this canyon for him. Then, too, the prisoners

could not be removed without ponies. And at this moment Hawkins, exhausted by the effort of helping Joyce to mount—an effort which ordinarily would not have affected him in the least—was standing by his pony, half leaning across the saddle, his head in his hands.

"There's no other way," muttered Lon.

He turned back toward the room.

"Remember!" he said to Manley.

The hoarse chuckle reached his ears again. None of the blind men turned their heads.

"I remember," said Manley's voice. "Good-by!"

"So long," said Lon, hesitatingly.

He thought there was a significance in the chuckle which followed; and in the adherence of the weak voice to its first version of the leave-taking.

"Good-by!"

But there was only one way before him. As Billy Hawkins looked wearily up at him for orders, he laid Roberts on the saddle of one pony and mounted the other himself. In all probability, the sheriff would regain consciousness before they reached rocky going. If he did not, Lon would then lash him to the horse. Now his only desire was to get away from the place of horror where it seemed the dead were sitting in watch over the living. Glancing behind him, he saw in the haze of dawn the dim figures of the Chinese who, as Manley had said, surrounded the house, ready

UPB

to see that the wishes of their leader were exactly carried out.

"Fork it, Billy," said Lon hoarsely, swinging into his own saddle.

As the sun swung over the eastern wall of the canyon, the cavalcade moved away.

VIII

TWO days later, Lon and another, like himself hard-bitten and lean, but stamped much more clearly than Lon with the earmarks of the detective, emerged from the shelter where Lon had left his prisoners and their silent guard forty-eight hours before. Lon according to his custom was apparently unmoved, but the hands of his companion were shaking as he opened out a folded sheet of paper. As he began to read, another man, mounted, who had ridden on down the valley when Lon and the other officer and the string of led ponies stopped at the stone house, came up.

"Well?" he asked as he dismounted.

Lon cleared his throat.

"Well, we needn't have brought the ponies," he said.

The man by his side began to read from the paper in his hand.

"It's addressed to you," he said, after the first words.

"Never mind. Read it."

" 'Dear Lon,' " went on the other unsteadily, " 'I done what I said. We never touched them, but we knew they all had poison on them that they was to drink if caught. Also

knew that if left to themselves they wouldn't use it, and we wanted to hear 'em die if we couldn't see. We just sat there, saying nothing. About six o'clock old Crewe drank his. The others followed. We knew they would. Thorndike was the last to go. He went crazy at the last. Good-by. We are going to the Green Chamber. H. Manley.' "

Lon drew a hand across his brow.

"You been down to that cavern in the rock, ain't you?" he asked the horseman.

"I have to where it seems to ha' bin," said the other, in a strangely hushed voice. "It ain't there no more. Looks as if somebody had dynamited the entrance. The whole wall of the canyon's fallen in over where you said it was. There's half a million tons of rock slid down over it."

"Has, eh?" said Lon slowly, putting on his wide-brimmed hat again and looking at the ground.

There was a moment's silence. Raising his eyes, Lanky surveyed the valley—the sullen stone beehives, now forever empty; the dancing, shimmering sand of the canyon floor, newly covered, as if to blot out the memory of scenes of horror, by the sandstorm of the day before, and up at the wall of the ravine in which indeed there now appeared a deep notch, just over the location of the Green Chamber.

"Well," said Lon slowly, turning to the lean man who still held the paper, "I guess this job's over, ain't it?"

His superior nodded.

"I don't think," said the desert man, "that there's any need for me to go back with you. If I carry on down this canyon, I may strike a trail."

"Business?" asked the lean man, as Lanky went to his horse.

"Private," said Lon mounting. "I'm—looking for someone."

The lean man nodded. He wondered what could be the nature of this search, mention of which brought such an odd, wistful look into the eyes of his grim subordinate. Was it for wife, sweetheart, brother, or for some mortal enemy? He would never know.

"Might give Roberts and the gal my regards," said the desert man, shaking out the bridle, "an' tell Billy Hawkins I'll see him again some time."

"All right."

"So I'll be joggin' along," Lon concluded.

Silent, erect in his saddle, he passed down the street of the deserted village toward where the ravine which had nearly stopped his wanderings forever should lead him again into the open desert.

THE END

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY
3 1197 21133 0243

The Pride of 500,000 Homes Offered to You

The Book of Etiquette is recognized as the most complete, the most exhaustive and authoritative work of its kind on the market to-day. Within the covers of these two famous volumes every phase of etiquette is discussed. There are chapters on bridal etiquette, on theatre etiquette, on etiquette in public, at a hotel, on a train. There is a delightful chapter called "The Etiquette of Games and Sports," and you will want to read "Teas and Other Entertainments," twice.

Thousands have gained social poise through the Book of Etiquette. It explains everything clearly, definitely. Each custom is traced to its origin, and the chapters are made as interesting as stories.

Are you at ease in public places? Do you feel self-conscious when the eyes of others are upon you? Do you know what to do and say on all occasions?

Etiquette, because it teaches you exactly what to do, say, write, and wear on all occasions, is extremely useful. It protects you from making mortifying blunders. It teaches you how to handle emergencies—how to have at all times a superior calmness and dignity that make people respect and admire you, no matter what the circumstances. It is the only sure way to avoid embarrassment, the only sure way to be happy and at ease in every environment, and with people of every social circle.

There may be, at this very moment, some little problems of conduct that are puzzling you. Should olives be taken with a fork; when should a wedding announcement be issued; why does the bride wear a veil; who pays for the wedding breakfast; how long should a widow wear mourning; how should a formal dinner be served; who precedes when entering a theatre, the man or the woman?

An endless list of questions, an endless chain of social problems, confront the man or woman who is not versed to the art of Etiquette. Most arts require long study and application, but the most useful one of all—that of knowing what to do and say on all occasions—can be quickly and easily mastered—indeed almost in one evening.

Here is your opportunity to receive the two handsome volumes bound in blue silk cloth and embellished in gold for only $3.50. Nelson Doubleday, Inc., has sold 500,000 copies of this set and in order to secure this remarkable offer you must clip and mail the coupon promptly.

Garden City Publishing Co., Inc.
Garden City, New York

Garden City Publishing Co., Inc.
Garden City, New York

Please send me the famous two volumes entitled "Book of Etiquette." I will pay the postman only $3.50, plus postage, on delivery. It is understood that I may return these books, if they are unsatisfactory, within five days and my money will be refunded.

Name .....

Address .....